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MIKE SHAYNE



MYSTERY MAGAZINE

APRIL, 1978
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NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

A PATTERN FOR TERROR

by BRETT HALLIDAY

When Tony Barton found the severed human ear in a desk drawer, he feared someone else was in big trouble. It did not occur to him that his discovery was to be his own death warrant. 2 to 50

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A Pattern For Terror

When Tony Barton finds a severed human ear in the desk drawer of his missing assistant he is advised to contact Mike Shayne, who is thus launched on his deadliest problem.

by BRETT HALLIDAY



ANTHONY BARTON FOUND the little white box in the rear bottom of the deep drawer on the right side of Pat McGuinness' desk. Barton was not seeking it. All he was looking for was some clue to the whereabouts of his assistant manager, who had been missing for the past two days.

Alyce had brushed off the disappearance, telling Tony not

to worry, that Pat would return in his own good time. She had even suggested that McGuinness was prey to the traditional Irishman's penchant for an occasional binge.

But, in the four months of their close professional and occasional social acquaintanceship, Pat had shown no alcoholic symptoms. No hangovers on Monday mornings,



no bloodshot eyes, not even the total abstinence of the sworn-off drunk. McGuinness was a two-drink man, and those before dinner, never before lunch, never afterward.

So Barton had worried, despite Alyce Wagoner's shrugged reassurances. He had phoned Pat's home just south of Miami both last night and early this morning — to no avail. So he decided to search his assistant's office and found the desk, with papers neatly arranged as usual, but beginning to pick up a light patina of dust.

He had opened the bottom drawer, expecting to find nothing relevant, and there lay the little white box.

It was roughly three inches square, a box with a lift-off lid that might have held evening studs and cufflinks. When Barton removed the lid, he found himself confronted with a layer of white cotton batting. When he lifted the cotton, he found himself staring at a severed human left ear.

Unbelieving, he gazed at it in horror. A single tentative fingertip touch revealed that this was human flesh, no joke in bad taste of colored plastic.

He replaced the lid, fighting to hold down the contents of his stomach, slipped the box into a jacket pocket and returned to his larger office, which adjoined that of the vanished man. There, he picked up one of the three telephones, planning to tell his secre-

tary to call Alyce.

But, when she responded with her soft Spanish-accented English, he said instead, "Juana, get me Martin Moreland, will you?"

Minutes later, he said to the attorney, "Martin, if I rush right over, can you spare me a few minutes before you go to court?"

"You're in luck, Tony," the attorney replied. "I just got word Judge Weylin won't be in court until the afternoon session. What's on your mind?"

"I'll show you when I get there," Tony replied. As he left the office, he informed Juana that he was going out for a while, time of return as yet undetermined. He felt another bout of queasiness as he placed the little white box on the right hand seat of his Mercedes convertible in the parking lot outside the administration building of Low Hills Towers, the plush resort development of which he was titular manager.

Martin Moreland, bald, bulky, burned to a walnut brown, utterly unflappable, poked at the ear with a forefinger, then turned it over. The cotton beneath turned with it, revealing a brownish stain.

"Blood." The attorney frowned at it, turned it back, then looked up at Tony Barton with keen dark blue eyes. "You really should report this to the police," he added.

"I know . . ." Tony hesitated. "But suppose this is — you've

heard of cases like it — kidnap messages." He shuddered, gulped, said, "I mean, what if it got out and something terrible happened?"

"Something terrible already has." Moreland's voice was soft. "Does this look like one of McGuinness' ears?"

"I don't know." Barton felt miserably helpless. "I never noticed Pat's ears especially."

"People seldom do," the attorney replied, "unless they flap in the wind or are scarred or something. So that's a blank. How well did — do you know this man, Tony? You say you've worked with him the last four months?"

Tony nodded, then shook his head. "I suppose I ought to know him better. But now, when I try to pin anything down, it's like water that slips through my fingers. Oh, I mean I can beat him three times out of five at tennis. I know he went big for seafood and I don't. I even know his favorite swear words.

"I know he likes women and most women like him. As far as I know, he's unmarried. But I don't really *know* anything about him that isn't in the office employment report . . . stuff like when he was born, and where, where he went to college, previous jobs."

Martin Moreland nodded slowly as his visitor's voice ran down. Then he reached for a desk phone, looked at Tony Barton keenly,

said, "I'm inclined to go along with you on not calling in the police at this time. But there is a less public route — if you have enough ballast in the bank to afford it."

Tony said, "Don't worry, Martin. Since I landed the Low Hills management job, I've been practically coining it. I can go for five figures at the bank."

"Glad to hear it, Tony. You may need it."

"Who are you calling, Martin?" Barton asked.

"Did you ever hear of a very special private investigator in Miami by the name of Mike Shayne?" Moreland asked, beginning to punch the digitals on the base of the phone.

II

TIM ROURKE LIFTED his boilermaker, half-emptied the glass, put it down, said, "An ear?"

"A human left ear, to be exact," Mike Shayne replied. They were seated on opposite sides of their regular booth in the rear area of The Beef House, their favorite fuel and watering place in Miami.

The lanky ace reporter of the Miami News screwed his hound-wrinkled face into a frown. "It sounds like a retake of that Getty kidnapping in France a few years back. You remember — old J. Paul Getty wouldn't lay out any money until the kidnappers sent

him one of his son's ears."

"I remember." Shayne nodded, then took an ample swallow of his Martell on the rocks.

"What have you found out so far?" Rourke asked.

"Damned little," the big redhead replied. "As far as Pat McGuinness is concerned, he could be from outer space. Except for his putting in four months as assistant manager of the Low Hills Towers resort, nobody ever heard of the man."

"A cover?" the reporter suggested.

Shayne nodded slowly, said, "That's the obvious explanation. But a cover for whom — or what?"

"How about the F.B.I.?"

"Russ Merritt at the local bureau claims he's not one of their boys — and I'm inclined to believe him. His right eyelid stops twitching when he stone-walls."

"The C.I.A.?"

"Hey!" said Shayne. "I've only been on the case half a day."

"You're taking it then, Mike?"

The detective nodded again, added, "Wild horses couldn't keep me off this one."

"Have you talked to Chief Gentry?" Rourke asked.

Mike Shayne shook his head. "If I told him now, he'd want in. And if it's some kind of hoax, he'd have *my* left ear."

"Hoax — with a human ear? Come on, Mike! It had to belong to somebody."

"It could have come from a funeral parlor — or the morgue. There's no way of telling who it belonged to."

"Where is it now?"

"I told Tony Barton to put it back where he found it. I hope to hell he did so. It had to be there for a purpose — and I don't think his finding it as he did was in the game plan."

"Jesus, Mike, how are you going to play it?"

"Mostly by ear." The redhead grimaced at his own unintentional jest, then said, "I'll fly by the seat of my pants."

Their dinner arrived then and, after thanking the pert and pretty little Irish waitress who brought it, there was silence while they waded into their food. Shayne had skipped lunch after accepting the case, and the cadaverous newsman was always hungry. While Shayne was content with a two-inch thick, blood-rare sirloin and baked potato, Tim dived into a huge casserole of short-ribs accompanied by a small army of German fries.

Not until half of his huge order was demolished did Rourke lift his head, mop his mouth with a napkin and say, "How are you going to play it?"

"I'm on vacation beginning tomorrow morning. I'm already registered as a paying guest at Low Hills Towers."

"Without cover?" the reporter's right eyebrow rose a notch.

"Why not? If Pat McGuinness was a cover, and if it was *his* ear Barton found, it doesn't seem to have done him much good. Besides, how long do you think my cover would last around Miami unless I dyed my hair blond and pasted on a set of false whiskers?"

"You've got a point," Rourke conceded. "Did you check out McGuinness' address south of here?"

"It was just a mail drop, Tim. He paid the landlady a few bucks a month to take his letters."

"Did he get any?"

"A few. He called her a couple of times a week and, if there were any, he'd drive around and pick them up."

"How does she read him?"

Shayne shrugged massive shoulders. "Just about like Tony Barton — a pleasant, soft spoken young man who called himself Patrick McGuinness."

"Then — the name *has* to be a cover." The reporter nodded.

Again the redhead shrugged. "It looks that way, doesn't it?"

Rourke pointed his fork at the detective, said, "If you come up with anything printable, just don't call the wire services first."

They finished the meal in silence, after which the reporter left on a date. Rourke was as voracious with women as he was with food and, despite his skinny frame and hound-wrinkled face, extraordinarily successful with them.

As he drove to his comfortable, slightly gone-to-seed residential hotel on Second Street, Shayne took stock of his impression of Anthony Barton. An attractive and pleasant personality, he judged. Likeability, of course, was all but essential for a career hotel and resort executive, which Barton was.

According to Martin Moreland, the troubled manager was in his late thirties, educated at Cornell like so many other professional hotel men, was an able and hard worker who had served his apprenticeship in lesser jobs and lesser hotels until the Low Hills Towers plum fell into his lap some two years earlier.

Moreland, who had come to know Tony Barton while handling some of the legal affairs of one Low Hills Towers several years back, recommended him highly both as a person and as a professional, adding, "He has the knack of knowing what his guests want — usually a step or two before they do."

This was the troubled young man who had found a severed left ear in the desk drawer of a seemingly phantom assistant.

Of Low Hills Towers itself, the detective knew virtually nothing save that it rated among the newer and best of the large luxury resorts that had sprung up around Miami since 1970 like complex and costly mushrooms.

Shayne was halfway home

before he sensed that he was not alone in the specially equipped Buick sedan he had driven for a number of years. Whether it was some slight unusual sound or some furtive flicker of motion caught in the rear-view mirror above the windshield, he was not certain. Nor, having accepted the presence of someone else, did he waste time in idle speculation.

It was ninety-nine to one that the intruder was hostile — if not, he would have announced him — or her — self. Besides, Shayne had locked the Buick in The Beef House parking lot and whoever it was had to know how to break into a locked vehicle without leaving traces of forced entry.

Since there had been no attack in the parking lot, it was, he reasoned, unlikely the intruder would strike while the car was in motion. For one thing, like the parking lot, it was almost certainly too public. Also, the intruder risked bodily harm if he put Shayne out of commission while the redhead was actually driving the car.

The ideal moment would be the instant he turned off the ignition in the basement garage of his own hotel. The ideal approach would be with a sap or sandbag, to knock him unconscious, then to finish him off in silence.

This, he decided, was too speculative. Whoever was back there was just as apt to attack him

with a knife or a gun. Shayne's job was to come up with a counter ploy that would not only save his own life but would enable him to trap the killer.

There were a number of questions he wanted to ask . . .

As he drove the Buick onto the downramp that led to its garage space, the detective jammed the gas pedal hard, then slammed on the brakes, stalling abruptly. Even as he swung about, drawing the Colt .45 from its shoulder holster, Shayne heard and felt the thud of a body against the rear of the front seat, followed by a vocal sound that was half-grunt, half-moan.

Pointing the automatic straight downward, Shayne said, "One move without an order from me, and you're dead."

There was neither visual nor audible response. Someone lay huddled on the rear floor of the car, but in the dim garage night lights, the detective could make out no more. His would-be attacker might have been a bundle of dark clothing.

"All right, friend," he said as the silence continued. "When I give the word and open the rear door, throw your weapon out and come out after it — on your hands and knees."

With fluid speed, Mike Shayne opened the driver's door, leapt out, gun in hand, and wrenched open the left rear door . . .

. . . but the figure huddled

A PATTERN FOR TERROR

there, motionless and silent.

"Throw your weapon out," he snapped. "Now!"

Still nothing happened.

Cautiously leaning closer, the redhead saw a trickle of dark liquid spill over from within the tonneau to drip gently on the garage floor . . .

III

LATE THE FOLLOWING AFTERNOON, Mike Shayne hung the third and last of his changes of costume in the ample wardrobe closet of his room high in the central structure of the Low Hills Towers resort. One rust-colored leisure suit, two pairs of slacks with sports jackets — the trio of occupied hangers looked lonesome in the closet's considerable expanse.

He folded and placed his half dozen spare shirts — four sports, two dress — in the tier of wooden drawers built into one end of the closet door, hung his robe and pajamas on a hook on the inside of the bathroom door, stowed his toiletries kit in a drawer, one of three beneath and between the twin washbowls.

His room was actually more like a suite, with a foyer, a dressing area and an ample balcony was well as bedroom and bath. But then, everything he had seen of the resort suggested deliberate violation of the save-space-at-all-costs typical of so much latter-day



living construction.

Low Hills Towers was redolent of low-keyed luxury in every department. Yet Shayne was beset with a gut feeling of unease beneath the soft surface.

He strolled to the balcony, lit a cigaret, studied the view carefully, his eyes narrow. Two other balconied towers, right and left, two out of sight, cut off his tower into which he moved. Lower straddled all five of them, their t

pub
his

garden terraces complete with turf, hedges, small trees and graveled walks. A pitch-and-putt golf course filled half of the ground level area, fine en-tout-cas tennis courts the other.

The parking areas were all underground and, beyond the driveways lay the beach and beyond that a remarkably peaceful ocean, turned to gold by the slant of the setting sun's rays. Brightly clad strollers and players looked like miniature animations from where he stood.

All very quiet, all very opulent, all very secure . . . yet Shayne, returning to his room, reopened his soft leather suitcase and withdrew the Biretta and its clip holster from a compartment of the bag and fastened the clip to the waistband of his slacks, then checked the deadly little weapon to make sure it was loaded and in firing order.

He had left his heavy Colt .45 locked in the special compartment of his Buick parked in a garage stall many stories below. The Colt was simply too big, too heavy, too cumbersome, above all too *visible* to be toted around in this sort of environment. Besides, at close range, the beautifully machined Italian hand-gun was easier to handle and deadly enough.

The redhead was tired and felt need of a drink. He picked up the one, asked for room service

one fifth of Martell

and setups, was assured he would have them directly.

A hell of a lot had happened since the would-be assassin had the ill luck to stab himself through the heart with his own stiletto on the parking ramp of the detective's garage the night before. There had been little time for slumber.

Shayne had had to call the police, of course. Hulking Len Sturgis, Chief of the Miami Homicide Bureau, was out of town attending a police convention in Denver. His assistant, Captain Phil Farley, interviewed the redhead in his office at Headquarters later that evening.

Farley was a sawed-off chunk of a man, deceptively soft-spoken, with pale blue eyes flanking a flattened nose. Studying Shayne across his desk, Farley made little effort to conceal his jealousy of the private eye.

He said, "A pity Chief Sturgis is out of town, but you'll have to make do with me. Who in hell was that poor bastard who knifed himself in your car?"

"Right now," Mike Shayne replied, "your guess is as good as mine. I never laid eyes on him before."

"Come on, Shayne," said Farley. "You must have some idea why he was after you."

"So help me!" The detective shook his head. "He was hardly a speaking acquaintance. All he uttered was one grunt as he died."

"Somebody sent him." Captain Farley's pale eyes narrowed. "Mind telling me what you've been working on lately?"

"Not at all. I just wrapped up a case for a client who thought his stepson was robbing his business blind. It turned out to be a computer error aided and abetted by the kid's private secretary, who was too scared to admit her mistake. The old man got his money back — it was there all the time — and the stepson got the secretary to take a trip to the Bahamas with him."

Captain Farley squinted at the redhead distrustfully, said, "It doesn't sound like your usual cup of tea, Shayne."

"It wasn't — as things worked out. But it looked pretty hairy until I conned the girl into admitting what she'd done."

"What's your next move?" Farley asked.

"I was going on vacation tomorrow, Captain."

"Where to? I may want you around." Shayne told him and the acting Homicide chief sighed and said, "I guess you can afford it if your fees are half as big as I've been told."

"Captain, my fees are none of your business. But you know where to reach me if you need me. May I go now?"

"I guess it's okay — but it still doesn't add. That kid had to have some motive for wanting you wiped out."

"Agreed," said the redhead. "You think I don't know that? But right now, it beats me, that's all. Think you can get a make on him?"

"We're sure as hell gonna try. He look Cuban to you?"

"Latino anyway. When and if you do make him, you might let me know."

"Ten to one he's an illegal," Farley mused. "Don't count on our spotting him, though. Maybe Low Hills Towers is a good idea. I hear they have A-one security. But if anything happens to you out there, for Christ's sake, get in touch."

"If I'm able to. Is that it?"

"For now," Farley growled. "Some people have all the luck."

Mike Shayne had spent the rest of the night visiting various unsavory resorts where information was sometimes available. But none of his regular paid informants had an inkling of who or what was behind the seemingly unprovoked assassination attempt.

He had managed two hours sleep before going to his Flagler Street office and wrapping things up there with Lucy Hamilton, his long-time secretary, pending his visit to Low Hills Towers. He was forced to tell her of the strange attempt on his life after Captain Farley called to report no progress in learning the assailant's identity.

Lucy, at first, was horrified but, like the temporary chief of detectives, ultimately agreed that

Shayne's going to the plush resort at this time was probably a good idea.

Then, with misgivings, "Unless it was your decision to take on Mr. Barton's problem that triggered the attempt on your life, Michael."

"No way, Angel," Shayne assured her, lifting her chin with a bent forefinger and planting a kiss on her brow. "The only people who know are Barton and Martin Moreland. Right now, Barton's too scared to speak to his own mirror reflection and Moreland is closer than hell where client information is concerned."

"Still . . ." Lucy shook her pretty head, her brow furrowed.

"You look lovely when you're worried," the redhead assured her. "Come on — I'll buy you lunch."

Shayne took her to a new French restaurant for the type of food she loved, even though he was a solid steak-and-potatoes man. Over his brandy and her *cafe royale*, she began to worry again, said, "Michael, there has to be a leak somewhere."

"Don't worry, Angel," he told her. "I've made more than my share of enemies over the years. So take it easy. Now I've got to get the Buick out of the police impound and go home and pack."

"I wish I were going with you," she told him.

"Somebody," said Shayne, "has got to hold down the fort."

At this point, Mike Shayne's summing up of the situation was interrupted by the discreetly soft sound of the door-chime. The redhead crossed the thick carpeting to answer it, reflecting again upon the quiet luxury of the Low Hills Towers resort. Whoever was financing it, he thought, was willing to put up apparently unlimited money toward making it truly de luxe.

A slim, handsome dark-haired youth in the establishment's elegant beige and blue livery brought in the brandy, ice and glasses on what looked like a Sheffield Plate tray. Behind the youth stood a short handsome ash blonde in a lavender pants suit whose simple elegance outmatched the room-service waiter's uniform.

She said in a dry crisp contralto of indeterminate regional origins, "I'm Alyce Wagoner. May I come in?"

"By all means, Ms. Wagoner," said the redhead, wondering how anyone could refuse such a direct request from such an attractive source. Alyce Wagoner, he knew, was Tony Barton's boss, the super-she-executive who ran the resort.

"Miss," she said, "not Ms. Welcome to Low Hills Towers, Mr. Shayne." Then, to the waiter, "That will be all, Miguel."

Shayne looked for a bill, saw none on the tray, fumbled for change to tip the youth. Miss Wagoner waved a negative hand,

said, "There is no tipping here at Low Hills, Mr. Shayne." Then, with the trace of a smile on her wide, well cut lips, "If you were a paying guest, the size of your bill would convince you tipping is unnecessary."

The detective's left eyebrow rose a notch. "Then I'm not a paying guest?" he countered.

"Hardly," Miss Wagoner replied. "If Tony hadn't invited you, I should probably have done so myself." She moved to the tray on its stand, expertly poured him a large cognac on the rocks, poured herself a slightly smaller libation, lifter her glass.

"Here's to crime, Mr. Shayne," she said. "Or rather to its abolition at Low Hills."

Smiling, Mike Shayne lifted his glass and drank. But behind his smile lay a sudden sense of confusion. When hiring the detective, Tony Barton had agreed to Shayne's stipulation that the fact he was at Low Hills Towers on business would be kept strictly between the two of them.

Why then, the redhead wondered, had Barton chosen to break the agreement even before Shayne's arrival — or had something happened that day to make Barton reveal the reason the detective was there?

He wondered which — or what. Something of his puzzlement must have shown on his face.

Miss Wagoner said, "Don't be alarmed, Mr. Shayne — I'm just

as concerned as Tony to learn why the ear was planted in Pat McGuinness' desk."

IV

MIKE SHAYNE DRAINED his drink to cover his surprise at Alyce Wagoner's statement. Her green eyes seemed to regard him with covert amusement that belied the all but invisible little lines of tension that bracketed the corners of her mouth.

She sipped her own drink, said, "Don't be too hard on poor Tony. I happened to walk into Pat's office as he was returning the little box to the bottom drawer. I *made* him tell me about it — after all I *am* his employer. At first, I was furious that he had not come to me at once upon finding it. But, on the whole, I approved of his actions, once he had explained them."

"So you were waiting for me?" said the redhead.

She nodded. "You might say that."

"I just did." He liked her voice, its depth, richness and husky undertone of hardness.

He added, "If you don't mind, I'd like to see McGuinness' office."

Alyce Wagoner nodded, rose to her feet, said, "Come with me then."

The administration offices for the resort were on the mezzanine of the central building. Moving

gracefully ahead of him, she led him through a large outer office in which a half-dozen desk employees were at work in an atmosphere of low-keyed efficiency, to a smaller room in which a single young woman sat behind a desk with a complex switchboard.

"Any calls for me, Juana?" she asked.

"Mr. Barton's trying to locate you." Juana's voice was liquid, her English pleasantly distorted by a Spanish accent. Neither beautiful nor pretty, she was strikingly attractive — slim, young, dark of skin, eyes and hair, wearing a short wedge haircut and flowered denims.

"Where is he — in his office?" Alyce Wagoner asked.

Juana shook her head, said, "He's around somewhere. He asked to be notified if a Mr. Shayne arrived." She gave the detective a sidelong glance.

"Any word from Mr. McGuinness?" Alyce Wagoner asked.

"Not so far." Another head-shake, then, "I wonder what's happened to him."

"I'd like to know that myself. Come on, Shayne." The Low Hills Towers manager led him into a brief hallway on which three doors opened. Nodding toward the one at the end, she said, "That's my office. Tony's is on the left. Pat's is on the right."

She opened the door to the missing assistant manager's office, led the way inside. Save

for a wall calendar adorned with a colored print of a cloud-wreathed Galway Bay, the missing man's place of work was spartan in its lack of adornment. Stooping and revealing in the act a firmly muscled backside beneath the seat of her lavender pants suit, she pulled open the deep bottom drawer of the desk.

"See?" she said. "It's still there. Tony told me you asked him to put it back." She straightened and looked down at it with an expression of distaste, added, "What next, Shayne?"

His eyes narrowed as he studied the little white box lying in solitary state on the green steel drawer bottom. He frowned and tugged at the lobe of his left ear in perplexity.

"Don't." He extended a powerful hand to halt her as she moved to shut the drawer. "There's something . . ."

Stooping, he picked up the box, eyed it closely, said, "As I remember it, the box I saw yesterday in Martin Moreland's office was square. This one is rectangular."

"My God!" the manager gasped. "What . . .?"

He lifted the lid, then the cotton batting beneath, once again found himself staring at a severed human ear.

"But why?" Alyce Wagoner's green eyes were wide with alarm. "Why change the box?"

"Look," he told her. "Look

closely." He tilted the little box to give her a clearer look.

"Holy Jesus!" she gasped. "It's the other ear!"

"It's a human *right* ear, that's for sure." He studied it a long moment, added, "Looks like the mate to the one Barton found yesterday."

Alyce sank into McGuinness' chair, her face white beneath its careful tan. She said, "Christ! Somebody is being cut to pieces. Why?"

"That," he told her, returning the lid to its place, "is what I came here to find out."

He put the little box in a jacket side pocket and followed her to her own office. While definitely a place for business, the room was clearly feminine in feel and decor. A single yellow rose stood in a bud vase on her large desk top, the blotter rested in a frame of leaf-damascened blue morocco. A Persian carpet rather than carpeting lay on the floor.

Nodding toward a teak and stainless steel cellarette in a corner, she said, "Shayne — Mike — mix me a Black Label and water. Not too much water. And mix yourself something. I don't have Martell, but there's some good Napoleon."

When Shayne had complied and seated himself opposite her, she said, "Why take one ear away and plant another?"

"Why indeed?" He patted the box in his pocket. "If that is



what's happened?"

"Mike!" There was husky appeal in her voice belying the assurance of her earlier manner. "What should we do now? I'd call the police, but . . ."

He understood her reluctance, her fear of what a full-scale police investigation might do to the resort that was, he judged, the aim and thus far the crowning achievement of an ambitious and determined female.

He ran a thumbnail along the line of his jaw, said, "For one thing, I don't think we should talk here. For another, I'd like

another word with Barton. You might ask him to come to my room."

She nodded, flipped a switch, gave the message to Juana. Then, regarding the redhead with troubled gaze, added, "Why shouldn't we talk here?"

"Because," he told her, "You've got a leak somewhere a lot bigger than the one in the dyke the little Dutch boy stopped with his finger." He finished his drink, rose, said, "Do you have time to show me the grounds?"

She rose with him, leaving her own glass virtually untouched, said, "Of course."

Strolling along a flower-bordered crushed garnet path past occasional small groups of colorfully clad residents and visitors, she said, her voice low, "What makes you so sure there's a leak?"

He told her of the attack on his life the night before. It had occurred to him that, if she already knew of it, he would be revealing nothing new — that, if she didn't, she should be informed. Alyce listened, her tanned countenance paling again.

He concluded, "Somebody else had to know, or that attack would not have taken place. When and where did you talk it over with Tony?"

"In Pat McGuinness' office," she replied. "Yesterday afternoon, when he got back from Martin Moreland's office after his talk with you." A pause,

then, "You don't suppose that Moreland —"

Mike Shayne shook his head. "Unlikely. Moreland is as honest as any successful lawyer in Miami. Besides, he was the one that called me in on the job. No, that's why I suggested we step outside. If there's a leak — and there has to be — it comes from back there." He turned to nod toward the office area of the complex that they had just vacated.

"Mike," Alyce said, "I'm scared spitless — and getting more so every minute. I don't know if you realize how much Low Hills means to me. It's a ten-year dream come true. Believe me, I've had to claw my way up in the world. My old man was an airman booted out of the Navy for drunkenness, my mother was a slut. I worked my way through business college as a call girl. I've been on my own since I was fifteen."

"You seem to have survived pretty damned well until now."

"Until now . . ." she echoed. Suddenly, she seized his upper left arm with a grip so fierce it took all Shayne's self control to keep from flinching. "Mike, if anything happens to destroy what I've helped to build, I don't know what it will do to me. For the love of God, find out what's going on, and stop it."

"How did Low Hills happen?" he asked her gently.

She sighed, loosened her grip,

said, "It began ten years ago, when I was lucky enough to meet a man named Leon Arrau. I'd been banging around in the business end of the resort-and-development trade, doing all right but not really getting anywhere. My meeting Leon Arrau was sheer happenstance — I happened to be working as a hostess-guide in a luxury resort in the islands" — she nodded eastward toward the Bahamas — "and he turned up there on vacation. We hit it off and one thing led to another . . ." She let it hang.

"Leon Arrau . . ." the detective mused aloud. "Wasn't he into the Cuban Rehabilitation Refugee Loan and Savings a few years back?"

Alyce Wagoner nodded. "Leon has his fingers in a lot of pies. But believe me, he sweetens everything he touches — and not just with money. The man is a promotional genius. But you'll meet him. We're having dinner together at the Shoreside Inn tonight. I want you to join us."

"Okay — glad to." He paused, added, "Does Arrau live here at Low Hills?"

Alyce shook her ash-blonde head. "He has a place on Moss Key. But Leon *is* Low Hills. He financed it from the word go. Without him . . ." She shrugged, then said, "You *will* join us this evening. I have a feeling something terrible is going on here. And if it is, I want you to work

with Leon as well as with me — and Tony, of course."

Shayne opened his mouth to remind this troubled woman that, until he had talked things over with his employer of title, he would not feel free to work for any other employer. He wanted to hear from Barton just what had happened when Alyce found him replacing the now-missing first severed ear in Pat McGuinness' desk. But just then an elderly lady yoo-hooed to Alyce to come and discuss with her some problem that had cropped up.

Reluctantly, Alyce left him after a brief further plea that he join them at dinner. Shayne approved the trimness of her rear elevation as she moved gracefully across a stretch of emerald turf. Then he turned and walked back to the tower high up in which his room lay.

When he reached the door, he found it ajar. Frowning, the redhead checked the Biretta in its belt clip and, with right hand on its butt, made a silent entrance, paused, looked around, stiffened.

Anthony Barton was sitting on the carpet, his back propped up against the far wall. From a small hole in his chest, a trickle of blood ran down the front of his sapphire blue turtleneck.

Tony Barton was thoroughly dead . . .

V

MIKE SHAYNE'S FIRST move

was to draw the Biretta swiftly from its belt clip. His second was to close the corridor door silently, punch the knob lock and turn the throw bolt. Then, hugging the walls as carefully and silently as a commando on the prowl, he circled the room, checked the closets and the opulent bathroom, including the stall shower. He even peered under the emperor sized bed before peeping cautiously out at the balcony.

Whoever had killed Tony Barton was gone. The detective was alone in his room with the corpse. Nor had the murderer left any visible sign of his presence behind him...

Shayne's next move was to squat and examine the fatal wound in Barton's chest. The shirt that covered the torso had been vertically slit, which indicated to the detective that his death was the result of a thin stiletto blade rather than a bullet.

The fact that a single thrust had done the deed indicated further that whoever wielded the knife was a skilled practitioner. Otherwise, almost certainly, the point would have glanced off ribs or sternum, requiring more than one blow.

The redhead rose, tugging his left earlobe, frowning at the body of his late client, who looked surprisingly peaceful for a victim of such a violent death. Had Barton been lulled into false security by the fact that he knew

his slayer and believed him harmless? Shayne wondered.

He slipped the safety back on and returned the Biretta to its belt clip, pondering the situation. Had the resort manager been murdered to keep him from talking to the detective — and, if so, what had he found out about the situation since his meeting with Shayne in Martin Moreland's office?

Had Barton called Moreland to tell him what he had learned?

If so, it indicated even more firmly that there was massive wire-tapping afoot in Low Hills Towers. Mike Shayne frowned and considered what his next move should be.

Tony Barton could not have been dead longer than a few minutes. The blood that had trickled from the tiny but fatal wound had not yet fully coagulated — and barely twenty minutes had elapsed since Shayne's request to Alyce Wagoner that he wanted to see the late manager in this room.

By rights, he should report the murder to acting Homicide Chief Phil Farley — but the redhead had a powerful hunch that this was exactly what the murderer expected him to do . . . for motives as yet undetermined. Shayne needed desperately to talk to Martin Moreland. But not by telephone from Low Hills.

He made up his mind quickly, left the room as he had found it with door ajar. It had been less

than seven minutes by his wrist-watch since he left Alyce in the pathway far below. Then he took the self service elevator to the garage level and claimed his car.

Not until he had put a couple of miles between himself and the scene of the murder did he pull into a parking spot and pick up the radio telephone from its under-the-dashboard bracket and dial Martin Moreland's office. He was lucky enough to catch the attorney just as he was leaving. Moreland agreed to wait when he learned of Tony Barton's murder.

"I can't believe it!" he told Shayne, pacing the carpet behind his desk, glass in hand. "What in hell is going on out there? If you're out a client, damned if I won't hire you myself. After all, I *am* a consulting member of the Board of Trustees."

"I've already got a client," the detective replied, rattling the ice in his own glass. "Did Barton get in touch with you at all after our session yesterday?"

"Was it only yesterday?" Moreland shook his greying head. "It seems like a week at least. No, Mike, I haven't had a word from him, in person or over the phone."

There was a pause for refilling, then the detective said, "Martin, what do you know about Alyce Wagoner?"

"Not much beyond the fact that she's damned attractive — and very damned efficient. I've

only talked with her a half dozen times since Leon Arrau brought her into the project at the beginning of actual operation. The story is she came up the hard way — which in her case is not bad."

"What about Arrau?" Shayne asked.

"He's the man behind the whole development — raised the money, put it all together. Until now there hasn't been a whisper of anything out of order."

"I've heard of him, of course," said Shayne. "Big international financier. A lot of clout in money circles. But always in the shadows."

"A man like Arrau almost has to keep a low profile. If he doesn't, Mike, he's a target for every con person on earth."

"What about his origins, his background, Martin?"

The attorney passed a hand over his wrinkled forehead. "Jesus, Mike," he said, "all I know is what I don't read in the papers. He's one of these numbered Swiss bank account boys who's all over the place — fingers in every big-earning pie from Bangkok to Bolivia."

"Ever meet him?" the detective asked.

Martin Moreland shrugged. "Three of four times — all connected with the Low Hills project — over the last half-dozen years. He's a pleasant little man — unassuming, very soft spoken. Light blue eyes that seem to bore

right into your soul while he's passing the time of day. Velvet glove and all that — but you can almost see the power radiate from him."

Shayne glanced at his wrist-watch, saw that it was already past six-thirty. He said, "Thanks, Martin, keep it mum about poor Barton."

"You haven't reported it to the police?" Moreland's eyebrows rose.

"Officially," the redhead replied, "I don't even know he's dead. If anyone asks, I was right here with you at the time he was murdered."

"Are you sure this is wise, Mike?"

"Hell, no," the redhead told him. "But I've got a heavy hunch— whoever killed Barton wanted me to report it — and at this stage, I'm trying my best not to do the expected. Let's keep it that way."

"Very well." The attorney sighed, shook his head. "It wouldn't be the first time I've perjured myself. But it will be the first time I perjured myself for a non-client."

As he drove through the early evening twilight toward the Shore-side Inn, Mike Shayne put his thoughts not so much on the possibilities behind the sudden reign of terror at Low Hills Towers — which as yet stubbornly refused to form any sort of pattern that made sense — as upon the evident determination of whoever lay be-

hind the crimes to keep Mike Shayne out of the case.

There had been the attempt of the night before upon his own life even before he was installed at the resort, then the murder of Tony Barton in his room. If Barton knew nothing — as he had claimed and as Alyce Wagoner seemed to believe — then his death might have occurred not to prevent his talking to Shayne but to bring the police into the affair and butt the redhead out.

There had been nobody else in the self-service elevator, either on his way up to the fifteenth floor or on the way down. This, for the moment, pleased the detective. If anyone else tried to place him in his room, the testimony would at least be questionable. To cover the interval between his leaving Alyce on the lawn and calling for his car, he could have stepped into one of the wash-rooms. Martin Moreland would back his alibi for the time thereafter.

As for the telephone tapping, his first impulse was to suspect the attractive switchboard girl, Juana. But the board calls through the box on her desk could well be tapped elsewhere.

Alyce, too, had appeared to be leveling — but that, too, rated further investigation. A girl who had whored her way through college could well have acquired underworld tie-ins that had proved impossible to break.

The evening was soft and warm, the traffic fairly heavy but in gentle temper. Few horns were honked at the inevitable slowdowns and tie-ups. While he drove on, Shayne found himself looking forward with anticipation to his meeting with Alyce and the shadowy Leon Arrau.

Out of long habit, the redhead checked his rear-view mirror for signs that he was being tailed. Three times during his drive to the Inn, he noted cars that seemed to be keeping a steady distance behind him. But two of them turned off the highway while the third drove right by him in the speed lane until its taillights vanished in the traffic ahead.

Shayne took an offramp half a mile ahead of his destination and no car followed until he had turned into the side road that bore the Inn's marker and a lighted arrow.

His destination proved to be a low brick and tile building set well back from the road and masked by cypress palisades. When he gave his name to the reservations captain, he was greeted with something close to reverence and led by a smartly uniformed attendant to a private room at the end of a slanting corridor, where Alyce and her companion awaited him.

VI

LEON ARRAU fully lived up to



Martin Moreland's precis. He was short of stature, medium thin, pleasant of manner, with the already noted piercing light blue eyes. Two other features Shayne noted that the attorney had not listed.

One — Arrau's voice, while softly modulated, held a latent resonance that suggested ability to dominate vocally the largest of board meetings if needed. Two — his slacks-and-jacket, while obviously expensive, were worn as casually as a teenager's denims — something that, in the redhead's experience, few truly rich men

ever achieve.

He said, "Glad you could join us, Shayne. In fact, glad to have you aboard. I've heard a good deal about you over the years. The way things have been moving the last few days, I think we're in need of your services."

The financier spoke in accents that reflected both British and American backgrounds, with a suggestion of Spanish beneath. As the detective acknowledged the greeting, he studied the room in which they were to dine. On the east, it was all window, directly overlooking the ocean. Save for the door by which he had entered, the walls were unbroken red cedar paneling. The carpeting was thick and soft underfoot.

A de luxe private dining room in all its fittings, including a lavishly equipped bar before which they were standing. Arrau himself did the honors, pouring the detective a Martell on the rocks without asking. He and Alyce Wagoner, stunning in a white flannel pants suit with silver sequins, both drank Johnny Walker Black Label.

Mike Shayne sipped his cognac, set his glass down on a silver coaster atop the bar, said, "Which one of you is now my client?"

They exchanged a glance. Alyce shrugged and Leon Arrau said, "I suppose you might say both of us — even though Tony Barton really hired you."

Shayne tugged at his earlobe,

took another pull at his drink, jiggled the ice in his now-empty glass, said, "I suppose you have good reason for not letting Barton continue as my client."

Another exchange of glances. This time Alyce picked up the ball. "As I believe I suggested earlier, Mike, we both feel our interests are more deeply involved in this mystery — and Tony was frankly quite glad to have us standing your fee. Any special reason?"

The detective took a deep breath, then said, "Apart from a desire on my part to know exactly who I'm working for, Tony Barton has been thoroughly disqualified as my employer."

Another exchange of glances between Alyce and Leon Arrau, this time with raised eyebrows. Then the financier said, "I don't quite understand. Just how has Tony disqualified himself?"

"I didn't say he had disqualified himself," Shayne replied. "I believe I said he has *been* disqualified. In fact, somebody murdered him" — a pause while the redhead looked at his wrist-watch — "less than two hours ago."

Grey eyes narrowed, Mike Shayne studied their reactions. In their different ways, both his clients' first expressions were of incredulity — followed by shock as they realized it was a subject on which the redhead could hardly have been joking. Then Alyce

sank into a chair, whispering a barely audible, "Oh, my *God!*"

Arrau put his glass down gently. His face looked frozen save for the bright blue eyes made lighter by his suntan. They seemed to bore into the detective like twin laser beams. He said, "What happened?"

Shayne told them exactly what had happened, what he had done about it, and why. They listened without interruption. When he finished his succinct account, Leon Arrau nodded slowly.

Then he said, "As far as you know, poor Tony's body is still in your room at the Towers?"

"As far as I know."

Arrau frowned ever so slightly, said, "I think you were wise in not notifying the police at that time. As for informing Moreland . . ." A brief hesitation, then, "But since it was Moreland who brought you into this . . ." He let it hang, nodded. "Of course, you had to establish an alibi." Then, to Alyce, "You might call Low Hills to see if anything else has happened."

"Of course, Leon." The manager shook herself as if coming out of shock. She rose and moved to a phone at the end of the bar, spoke briefly to someone on the other end, put the instrument back in its cradle.

"No alarms — yet," she told them, thanked Leon Arrau as he placed a refilled glass in her hand, sank back into the chair,

As she did so, she spilled a few drops on her white flannel pants suit but seemed either not to notice or not to care.

The financier said, "In view of what has happened . . ." Picking up the phone himself, he cancelled the dinner, poured fresh drinks for the detective and himself, led the way to the beautifully set small table.

Only then did he express any emotion. "Those bastards!" He spoke softly although his knuckles were white about his glass. "This time they've really gone too far."

"Oh dammit, darling!" Alyce Wagoner sounded close to tears. "That poor innocent man."

Mike Shayne frowned at Arrau, said, "Will somebody please fill me in? Thus far, I've survived one assassination attempt and what could have been a very efficient murder frame. If I'm to be of any use . . ." It was his turn to let one hang.

The financier said, "Shayne, I suppose you know I am a capitalist in the true meaning of that much abused word. I have made it my business to raise capital for what appear to be profitable ventures. On the whole, over the years, I have been very successful — largely because, like other successful promoters, I virtually never use my own money."

He was not boasting, the detective judged, merely stating facts. Shayne nodded, lit a fresh cigaret,

waited for him to continue.

"Very well," Arrau stated after a pause. "Sometimes, with large sums at stake, it is unwise to look too closely at their source. For example, some ten years ago, as I was considering Low Hills Towers as an investment potential, I was approached by an agent for a group of young Argentine investors who had a great deal of liquid cash at their disposal.

"For a number of good reasons, this group wished to put this money to work for them in some foreign country — preferably the United States, which they felt to be the safest nation, financially, in the world."

Arrau spread his well manicured hands, added, "So I put the two together — Low Hills and the Argentine money. Such is the nature of my business. Alyce, perhaps you would like to take over at this point. It was you who first smelled it out."

Again Alyce Wagoner shook herself, said, "Well, a project like Low Hills needs a great deal of money to get off the ground, and there were frequent calls for further investment before we first began to turn a profit. Each time, the money was forthcoming, but — well, not unnaturally, since we were dealing with South American backers, I began to take an interest in Argentina. I can read and speak a little Spanish, and I began taking *La Prensa*, the Buenos Aires newspaper.

"After a while, I began to notice something odd. Each time we needed more money, there seemed to follow a big-time kidnapping or major terrorist threat somewhere down there — you may have heard how chaotic conditions are in Argentina in that regard. I tried to tell myself it was mere coincidence, Mike, but it happened so many times I mentioned it to Leon."

"I looked into it." Arrau picked up the ball again. "A man like myself has many sources of information. I'm afraid there was no doubt about it. Low Hills Towers has been financed from the first by the profits of a large-scale Argentine terrorist organization."

Shayne nodded, hoping his stomach would not begin to growl openly with hunger, said, "I've wondered now and then what successful skyjackers do with their loot."

"A very clever operation." Leon Arrau nodded his approval. "There has to be a real brain behind it. Instead of wasting their money when they got into the big time, their leader decided to put it to work for them in something the law could hardly take away — at least in the United States.

"The leadership quality required not merely to pull off such a series of successful criminal coups but to control what has to be an incendiary group so tightly

that they are willing to let it be invested in such a way — such leadership quality has to be extraordinary."

"I agree." Mike Shayne nodded. "And those severed ears — they fit. But whose ears were or are they? And why in this Pat McGuinness' desk? And who in hell is Pat McGuinness?"

"Those," Arrau said softly, "are a few of the questions we have hired you to answer. Until very recently, there has not been even a whisper of irregularity in the operation of Low Hills Towers. Frankly, if this is not quickly stopped or if word gets out, I see little hope for the project's future — at least on its present high level."

Listening, Mike Shayne had come to the conclusion that the key to the series of mysteries lay in the finding, or at least the identification, of Patrick McGuinness.

Aloud, he said, "I think the next step is to get back to the Towers and dispose of my former client's body."

Arrau frowned, said softly, "I don't like the idea of bringing the police into this if it can be avoided in any way. Mind you, Shayne, I'm not condoning Barton's murder, or any murder — but the impact of such a discovery upon the investment . . ." He shrugged.

Alyce rose, said angrily, "You sound as if money was sacred,

Leon."

The financier shook his head as he stood up. "No, *querida*, I do not hold money sacred — but I do believe it is man's most important invention — even including the wheel. Nor is money the root of all evil — but *love* of money is."

Shayne said, rising, "Then I'd better get on with the job."

"Sorry about dinner," said the financier. "Remember, no police unless circumstances make it unavoidable."

VII

MIKE SHAYNE RAN a thumbnail along the line of his jaw, said, "What about Barton's body? We can't just leave it where I found it. Sooner or later, somebody — the maid, somebody — is going to discover it. Besides . . ." He shrugged.

Leon Arrau frowned, looked at Alyce with raised eyebrow. She closed her eyes briefly, then said, "Miguel?"

"Miguel can't handle it alone. Besides, where to put it . . ."

"The freezer storage room," she said. Then, to the detective, "Will you help, Mike?"

"It's not exactly my line," Shayne frowned again. "But okay."

The financier said, "If the two of you can manage it, that would be best. Put it in a trash bag — and try not to be seen."

Alyce Wagoner said, "Ugh! Some of the things we do to make a living!" She picked up a pale blue wrap from a settee against the far wall, added, "Come on, Mike — let's get it over with."

"You go with Shayne," said Arrau. "I've got a couple of calls to make." His eyes seemed to radiate chilled steel.

There was little talk between them during the drive back to Low Hills Towers, whose five high-rise buildings loomed up in light-dotted silhouette against the semi-tropical night sky as they approached it. Alyce got out of the Buick in front of the main entrance, said, "I'll get what's needed. Wait for me in your room." Then, before turning away, "Poor Tony — he was such a well meaning guy."

Grimly, minutes later, Mike Shayne unlocked the door of his fifteenth-floor room. He was not relishing the prospect of sneaking out the body. But when he stepped inside, the body was not there.

Once again, the redhead unclipped his Baretta and began a wary search of closets, bathroom and balcony. He had put the weapon back in its waist clip and was standing in room center, trying to figure it out, when Alyce's finger pushed the door chime.

Alyce had changed into a dark coverall and was carrying a folded green plastic trash bag over one arm. Her initial expression, which was grim, changed to bewil-

derment as he indicated the empty place against the wall where Barton's body had sat.

"What have you done with him?" she asked.

"Nothing." Shayne pointed to a small dark stain on the wall, added, "If it weren't for that bloodstain, I'd have thought I dreamt it. Evidently, he was stabbed with a blade long enough to go clear through his chest."

Alyce closed her eyes and began to shiver. The redhead put a steady arm around her, was astonished at the frailty of her body. After a moment, she looked up at him and said, "But who . . . ? I don't understand."

"Neither do I," the detective assured her. "Evidently, somebody beat us to it. I don't think I was supposed to find it at all."

"Jesus!" She pulled away from him, sank into an armchair, said, "Mike, what do we do now?"

"You mentioned a freezer room," he said. "I'd like to take a look at it — now!"

"Okay." She rose like an automaton, added, "I brought the keys with me."

"Good." He followed her out of the room, double locked it, thinking grimly, . . . *after the horse is stolen*. They walked a long, twisting corridor to the service lift at the rear of the tower, took it down to a sub-basement, followed another twisting corridor lighted by fluorescent tubes, entered a white-walled chamber whose far

wall was mostly one huge multi-locked door.

"It's cold in there," she remarked as she put keys to two separate locks. "We freeze all our own meat fresh-killed. That way, we can be sure it is properly aged before using it."

Great beeves hung eerily from long rows of hooks, their flayed bodies white with rime. Shayne felt the physical grip of the cold as they walked between rows of dead animals, large and small, dangling from steel hooks that in turn descended from heavy metal beams just below the ceiling. He could actually see Alyce begin to shiver, wondered how long either of them could stand the cold.

They had covered less than half of the huge storage freezer when she led him hurriedly back outside, said, "I can't stand it any more. I should have worn a fur coat."

"I feel like an ice-cube myself," Shayne assured her, smiled at the continued chattering of her teeth. "How can the meat luggers take it?"

"They wear insulated clothing." She indicated a closet in a side wall, added, "We'd better put some on."

They found white coveralls in various sizes, complete with head-pieces containing visibility panes. Before adjusting these, Alyce asked the detective, "You think somebody put poor Tony in there?"

"It's possible. If they didn't, I want to know that, too."

This time, they were able to search the huge locker thoroughly. And, in a rear corner, all but completely concealed by a heap of lamb carcasses, the detective discovered not one but two dark green trash bags of suspicious shape. He and Alyce exchanged significant glances before Shayne bent and got clumsily to work opening the nearer bag. In a few minutes, Tony Barton's lifeless eyes stared up at him. At his side, Alyce Wagoner turned her face away.

Mike Shayne went to work on the second bag after sealing poor Barton up once more. This time, he thought grimly, he was due to discover what Pat McGuinness had looked like. But when he got it open, the head whose eyes stared sightlessly back at him was bald, it was old — and it was without ears, both of which had been neatly sheered from the flesh.

The redhead took a good long look at it before covering it up once more. There was something familiar about that face — he had seen it not long before looking out from a page of newsprint or a television screen. He left the bodies as he had found them, hustled Alyce out of that grisly chamber, fighting a sudden, not wholly illogical fear that someone might at any moment lock them in that storeroom of death and terror.

Outside, when they were clear of their insulated clothing, Shayne said, "Do you know who that was — the other one?"

She said, "I'm not sure, but I think so. I've seen that face somewhere recently. But where?"

"Was he a guest of Low Hills Towers?" the detective asked.

"Nooo." She drew it out, frowning, as they walked back toward the elevators. "He looks different, of course, with no ears, but I seem to remember him from TV — the news, I think."

"My impression, too," the redhead agreed as they rode upward. "At least we know where the ears came from."

"Do you suppose he was alive when . . . ?" she shuddered.

"No." Shayne's denial was emphatic. "There would have been more blood. Jesus, what a ploy — using a dead man's ears for extortion or whatever! For all we know, he may have died from natural causes."

They left the elevator at the eleventh floor, where Alyce had her apartment, a four-room suite whose living room, the detective noted, contained a pair of large, well filled bookcases with contents that, somewhat to his surprise, looked well read.

She followed his gaze, smiled faintly, said, "Yes, Mike, I read whenever I get the chance. Everything, from mystery novels to economic theory. If you're hungry, I'll order whatever you

want from room service."

"How about you?"

"I didn't think I'd ever want to eat again after you told us about poor Tony. But that cold room . . . How about a drink first?"

She ordered him a steak, rare, herself a mutton-chop mixed grill, added as she hung up, "You have no idea how hard it is to get mutton these days. We have to import ours from New Zealand. They just don't let lambs grow big enough before slaughtering in this country."

His left eyebrow rose a notch. "I should think you'd had enough about slaughter tonight."

She winced, then smiled, sighed and made them drinks. While they awaited the food, they tried to recall where, when and under what circumstances they had seen the earless man — to no avail.

"I keep thinking South America," the detective told her. "Maybe because of what Leon Arrau told us at the Inn."

"You could be right — but I can't key it."

"Tell me something about your staff: I notice both Miguel and Juana are Spanish names."

She nodded. "The core of our staff is largely South American," she said. "They're attractive and don't believe what they say about their not being good workers. These kids aren't afraid of it."

"Was it always that way?"

Shayne asked her.

Alyce frowned, considered, shook her head. "We had a few Argentines at the beginning — the investors suggested them and we're not sorry they did. But the bulk of our employees were North American. Now the Latins comprise about forty per cent. They keep coming up with brothers and sisters and cousins who want to work up here. We have only had to turn down or fire a handful."

"What about Juana?"

"She's a jewel," said Alyce. "Why?"

"I keep thinking of the telephone leak I mentioned earlier," Shayne told her. "Juana's perfectly positioned to be in on that."

"Oh, damn, I hope not. Juana is virtually indispensable. I'd trust her with my life — also Miguel."

"I hope not, too," the detective commented.

The food arrived on a room service cart pushed by a slender young man whose dark hair and eyes and complexion proclaimed him another Latin. He served it deftly and departed with a charming smile.

"That was Pedro," Alyce said when he had gone. "He's another jewel."

Mike Shayne surveyed his platter with the expression of a starving wolf who has just found a tempting young lamb. It sat steaming in its own juices on a sizzling platter, surrounded by watercress, a half dozen thick



green asparagus stalks running with unsalted butter, golden Long Branch potatoes and a grilled half-tomato. The filet was so tender despite its two-inch thickness that the detective could have cut it with his fork. It was charcoal-black outside, blood-rare within.

Alyce Wagoner's mutton chops, wrapped around their kidney centers, almost made Shayne regret not having ordered them. The vegetables surrounding them matched his own, but each chop was topped with a thick slab of crisp bacon, topped in turn by a large mushroom cap.

Hungry as they were, they waded in without pause for conversation save for occasional requests for salt or pepper. If the rooms and service of Low Hills Towers were wholly de luxe, the food came up to standard right alongside. While he ate, the redhead put aside conscious thought of the case they were involved in, which permitted his subconscious mind to work more freely.

As he swallowed the final bit

of steak and reached for his brandy, Mike Shayne had a sudden flash. He said, "Cortes — Ramon Cortes — does the name ring a bell?"

She laid down her fork, her eyes alight, said, "Of course — Ramon Cortes! But how did his body get here?"

VIII

"THAT," SAID Mike Shayne, "is the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question."

"Mike, I'm scared," Alyce's lips looked blue beneath the pale pink makeup that covered them. "I feel as if my whole world has suddenly gone stark, staring mad."

"I don't blame you," he told her. "In your place, I'd be scared, too. Let's see — isn't, or wasn't, Ramon Cortes some big Argentine billionaire who disappeared a few weeks back?"

"That sounds right." She nodded, then said, "But why bring him here?"

"There could be a number of reasons. For one — this project is Argentine owned. For another — probably Argentina got too hot for them. They could easily bring him up here by private plane. I'm going to call a newspaper friend of mine right now and find out."

He reached for the telephone at the other end of the table between them, got hold of it

faultily so that it slipped and the dial portion fell to the carpet upside down. With a muttered curse, the redhead bent to pick it up.

As he did so, he noted a tiny scratch near one of the screw-heads, said, "What's this?" and examined it more closely.

"What is it?" Alyce asked.

Mike Shayne put it down carefully on the table, said, "It looks very much as if your phone has been bugged, baby. Somebody's taken it apart and put it together again — quite recently, by the looks of the scratch on the bottom."

Alyce Wagoner uttered a four-letter expletive.

"Any more phones in the apartment?" he asked.

"In the bedroom."

He rose swiftly, examined the light lavender instrument on Alyce's night table. This time, there was no telltale scratch on the bottom. The detective produced a small many-bladed knife from a trouser pocket; opened a screwdriver blade and took the phone stand apart. A tiny globule was there inside.

Alyce made a quick move to pluck it out, but the redhead stopped her, saying, "For the time being, leave it alone. Why let anyone know you're onto it?"

"But I feel so naked!" she cried.

"Just watch your language when you call." He got the

instrument together once more, thanked her for the meal, turned to leave the apartment.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"To my room — to see if my phone's been bugged, too," he told her.

"Come back," she said, her whole body pleading. "I don't want to be alone tonight."

He paused in the doorway, grinned down crookedly at her, said, "Don't think I'm enjoying this either, darling. You're quite a dish. I'll get back if I can — but don't count on it. Besides, what about Leon?"

"Don't worry about Leon. We have an understanding. Unless we're together, he's free to go his own way and I'm free to go mine."

"I'll remember that," he assured her. He lifted her chin between thumb and forefinger, lifted her chin and kissed her on the lips. She tasted as good as she smelled and, for a moment, he almost kicked the door shut behind him and took her in his arms.

But sudden vision of Tony Barton's dead eyes, of the earless head of Ramon Cortes, intervened and, with a half-salute, he turned on his heel and marched out into the corridor.

Examination of the phone in his fifteenth-floor room proved that he, too, had been bugged. For a moment, the big detective frowned — the wire-tapping oper-

ation at Low Hills Towers was even more massive than he had suspected. He decided to take a chance on catching Tim Rourke at The Beef House.

The lanky reporter was in his usual booth, staring gloomily into a near-empty boilermaker. He looked up and said as Shayne sat down across from him, "Decided to go slumming, Mike — Low Hills Towers too rich for your blood?"

The redhead smiled crookedly at his old friend and planted a light punch along the side of his jaw. "Watch your language, Tim. But you're right about Low Hills being too rich for my blood — or anyone else's. What have you got on an abducted Argentine billionaire named Ramon Cortes?"

Rourke's dark eyes flashed with interest. He finished his drink, then said, "Jesus, Mike — the ear!"

"Ears," said the detective. He pulled the little white box from his jacket pocket, laid it atop the table between them. "Here's the other one."

He signalled the waitress for drinks as Rourke opened it gingerly and grimaced at its contents, quickly put the covering cotton and lid back in place. "What makes you think it belonged to Cortes?"

Mike Shayne told him. Rourke listened without comment until the drinks arrived, drained half of his fourteen-ounce highball glass at a gulp, then said,

"Thanks, I needed that, Mike." He sighed, added, "Oh, well — I never really wanted to be a billionaire. I just want to live like one. Jesus, that poor rich old bastard!"

"You can say *that* again!"

Rourke cocked his head on one side, squinted at the redhead, said, "Jesus — if Phil Farley or Will Gentry ever find out you're sitting on two corpses, they'll have you locked up and throw the key away. What a story!"

"You breathe a word of it until I give you the sign, Tim, and I'll nail your hide to the city room wall."

"How in hell are you going to handle it?"

"There's only one way — find the killer and turn the whole package over to Farley."

"Mike, have you any idea who did it?"

The detective shook his red head, said, "Not yet, Tim. All I'm sure of at this point is that there's a well organized Argentine terrorist cell operating out of Low Hills Towers. Some of those attractive kids are deadly as coral snakes. They've already tried for me once. The next time, I'll be ready for them."

"You hope," said the reporter.

"I hope." Shayne finished his drink, lit a cigaret. "In the meanwhile, I'd like to know what's happened to Pat McGuinness. I still haven't figured out his role in this charivari. Have you picked

up anything on him?"

"Only negative, so far, Mike. According to my informants, you're right in thinking he's not F.B.I. He's not C.I.A., either."

"You're sure?" Shayne frowned.

"Got it right from the local bureau chief's private secretary. She never heard of Pat McGuinness — and she knows the whole roster on the local scene. She won't give me *their* names, natch, but she *can* tell me who doesn't belong to the club. McGuinness is a definite no." Rourke shrugged, added, "That's it, I'm afraid. Wish I had come up with more."

"You've done fine, Tim." Shayne reassured his old friend.

"I don't see how, Mike."

"Sometimes a little negative knowledge goes a long way." The redhead beckoned the waitress over, told her to bring Rourke another boilermaker.

"What about you, Mike?" The reporter looked his surprise at Shayne's not ordering for himself.

"Duty calls, my friend." The redhead got to his feet.

"The hours you keep!" Rourke shook his head. "You should join a union."

By Shayne's wristwatch, it was almost exactly twenty-four hours earlier that he had left Rourke at The Beef House and driven home with a would-be assassin lurking in the rear part of his

Buick. The coincidence sent a warning prickle up his spine. Merely because one attack had failed did not signify the murderers might not try a repeat performance. Quite the contrary — they might calculate that the first failure would cause their target to be off his guard.

The Buick *looked* untouched — but then, it had looked untouched the previous night. Drawing the Biretta from its clip, the redhead approached his sedan cautiously. The doors were locked, front and rear — and there was sufficient light in the parking lot to reveal that no one lay crouched behind the front seat. Similarly, the luggage compartment in the rear was empty.

Having circled the Buick, Mike Shayne unlocked the left front door and reached for the handle. Then, after brief hesitation, he went forward and lifted the hood, peered at the motor.

The bomb was there, wired neatly to the starter mechanism. The detective studied it, frowning, for a long moment before drawing his pocketknife and, moving very carefully, defusing the deadly little package. It was simple, efficient — and thoroughly lethal.

From the fact that he had not been molested while at Low Hills Towers, Shayne deduced that somebody must have issued an order that no more violence be committed on those exclusive premises — which meant he had

better be on his toes at all times while away from the resort.

He felt as if he had opened a tin can and found himself peering in, not at worms, but at a nest of rattlesnakes . . .

When he drove out of the parking lot, Shayne turned right instead of left, toward Low Hills. Despite its immaculate luxury, his room at the costly resort held no appeal. He needed a night's sleep and there was only one place he felt sure of getting it — his own comfortable, somewhat threadbare apartment in the weathered residential hotel on Second Street . . .

IX

MIKE SHAYNE WAS wakened at shortly after seven the next morning by the steady ringing of the extension phone on his night table. Groping sleepily for the handset, his muttered, "Hello — Shayne here," was greeted by Alyce Wagoner's "Thank God, Mike! I've been so worried about you."

"I'm okay," he replied. "Why the alarm?"

"When I found you weren't in your room, I panicked," she replied. "After all — with what we found last evening . . ."

"Where are you calling from?" The detective was fully alert.

"Don't worry. I'm using a pay phone. What happened? I thought you were coming back. I could

hardly sleep a wink."

Shayne nodded, then said, "I told her not to fool with them. At that time, I had no idea Interpol was responsible. Now, what in hell is it you want of me?"

Arnold, who was evidently Murray's superior, took charge. He said, "Shayne, I don't know how much of the background you have picked up. As long as the Argentine terrorists confined their activities to their native land, Interpol could not step in. We kept an eye on things, of course, but there was no reason to summon us. But then we realized an extremely efficient and imaginative group of young terrorists was funneling a large part of their extortion and kidnap money into a Florida project — Low Hills Towers, to be precise."

Save for the Interpol angle, what followed was close to the information Leon Arrau had given him the night before.

"Sorry, Alyce, but I had to come into town and decided I might as well sleep at home." In view of her distraught condition, he did not tell his client about the bomb in his car, judged it would only heighten her alarm.

"When can you be here?" she asked.

"Why? Has something else happened?"

"No — not yet. But I feel as if I had a sword of Damocles hanging over me."

Understandable — but try not

to panic."

"Try to get down here, Mike. I don't know my friends from my enemies any more."

"I'll get there as soon as I can," the detective assured her. Something's got to break — and damned soon."

Shaving and showering, the big redhead felt twinges of regret over not having gone back to Alyce Wagoner the evening before. The project manager was not only a desirable woman, she was a desirable woman in trouble who had turned to him for help in her hour of trouble. He wondered if he was getting old.

Not until Shayne stepped out of the bathroom did he become aware of his door buzzer sounding its summons. Frowning, he donned a white toweling robe, a birthday gift from Lucy Hamilton, and moved to answer it. Then, on second consideration, he detoured to pick up the Biretta from its resting place beside the bedroom telephone and thrust it into the robe's ample front pocket.

The two men who stood at his door sill were utter strangers. Well dressed, well conditioned, to Shayne they carried the aura of authority. The taller of them said, "May we come in, Mr. Shayne? I'm Peter Murray of Interpol." And, indicating his companion, "This is my colleague, Jeremy Arnold."

Both men produced identification, and, after examining it,

the detective stood back and waved them inside.

Interpol — the world-wide bureau, centered in Paris, especially organized to combat international crime. It figured, Shayne thought, as he got them seated on his living room sofa and perched himself on an arm of the big chair opposite. He studied the one who called himself Peter Murray, smiled faintly and said, "Is it Peter Murray — Patrick McGuinness?"

The visitors exchanged a glance, then answered the redhead's half-smile. Then the one addressed said, "Guilty — both counts. It hardly matters, since my McGuinness cover was blown four days ago!"

"Was it the ear?" Shayne asked him.

"The ear was the final touch. The moment I found it, I knew my usefulness at Low Hills Towers was ended. I was called back to Paris to make a report and only got back here late last night." A brief pause, then, "We know your record here, of course, Mr. Shayne. Even so, I hardly expected you to spot me so soon. Was it the initials?"

"They helped. But I had a good description — plus the fact that Patrick McGuinness had to be a cover."

"Shayne — Jeremy Arnold picked up the ball — "our presence here is entirely unofficial. Actually, we have come to ask for

your assistance."

The redhead let his bewilderment show, said, "But you've been on this case at least four months, while I've only had two days. Under the circumstances, I'm the one who should be asking for help."

Arnold's half-smile returned. He said, "Perhaps we can pool what we know to our mutual welfare."

"If you know I'm on this case, you must know who my client is. I'm not going to reveal anything I think might damage my employer. And I still don't see how I can help you."

"Since the night before last, Shayne," said Peter Murray, "You have survived one murder attempt. You have had a private conversation with Leon Arrau — and you have found the bodies of Anthony Barton and Ramon Cortes. This is more than we have been able to accomplish in the five months we were on the case."

"'Were' on it, Murray?" the redhead countered. "Does that mean you're off it?"

The visitors exchanged a glance. Then Jeremy Arnold said, "We're not quite off it, Shayne — but we've been ordered from Paris to halt any further investigation until we get word to the contrary. It seems *Senor Cortes* has very important connections in Buenos Aires and elsewhere, connections who fear he may not

survive his abduction unless we step aside."

"But Cortes is dead," Shayne stated flatly. "That should remove your handcuffs."

"We have only your word on that," said Murray. "And we are hung up until his family gives us permission to resume."

"Incidentally," said the big detective, "There's no way you could know about my finding Barton and Cortes unless you have Alyce Wagoner's place bugged. I presume that was one of your accomplishments while you were working there."

"I hope you won't tip Wagoner off, Shayne," said Arnold.

"She already knows about the phones, Arnold," the redhead replied.

The visitors exchanged another glance. Then Jeremy Arnold said, "She hasn't had them removed yet. Are you sure you tipped her off?"

" . . . so we planted Peter Murray in an executive job there and sat down to wait. Now, just we we were beginning to get results with the actual bringing of Ramon Cortes — or his body — to Florida, we find ourselves handcuffed."

Mike Shayne repeated, "But what in hell can I do? Right now, all I'm trying to do is keep my client alive."

"Sooner or later," said Jeremy Arnold, "these people have got to move Barton and Cortes out of

that meat freezer. What we want of you, Shayne, is information when that occurs — better yet, advance information on when it is to occur. Then we can make our move."

Shayne considered the merits and demerits of the proposition. He said, "If I should get this information and offer it to you, *and* it does not endanger my client's life or interest, what's in it for me?"

The visitors exchanged another raised-eyebrow look. Then, as one, they rose. Jeremy Arnold said, "We'll do what we can for you, of course. But we can make no promises at this time. I only hope you see it our way."

"I'll do my best," the redhead replied. "By the way, Murray — was it that left ear that scared you off?"

"You might say that — at any rate, it showed me my cover was blown, so I had to report. Why?"

Mike Shayne dug into a coffee table drawer and produced the second little white jewel box, handed it to the erstwhile Patrick McGuinness, said, "You might as well have its mate."

The visitors left with what dignity they could muster. After locking the door behind them, the redhead tugged at his left earlobe, then half-smiled.

He had been deliberately hard with them. When and if it came time for action, he wanted them to have no qualms as to calling

in the Miami Police. He had a hunch, when that time arrived, that he was going to need a lot of help — fast . . .

X

MIKE SHAYNE'S TELEPHONE rang again just as he was putting on his shoes. It was Lucy. She said, "Michael, a Mr. Arrau is anxious to speak to you. Shall I give him your home number?"

"It's okay, Lucy. He's one of our clients. Are you okay, Angel?"

"I'm fine," she replied, "but what about you? What are you doing at home? I thought you were staying at Low Hills Towers."

"I still am," he told her. "But — oh, hell, it's a long story, Angel. I'll tell you all about it in our next. Better have Arrau call me here. Okay?"

"You're sure you're all right, Michael?"

"Stop mothering me, love, and get me Arrau."

The connection was broken abruptly and the big detective smiled as he put the handset back in its cradle. Less than a minute later, it rang again. Leon Arrau didn't waste time asking Shayne why he was not at the resort.

He said, "I want to talk to you, Shayne. How soon can you get to the Moss Key pier at the South Bay Marina?"

"About forty minutes, using the

Expressway."

"My launch will be waiting."

That was all. As the redhead checked his pockets and redonned his Biretta, he considered the capitalist's terseness over the phone with his ability to handle long sentences while explaining the financial background of Low Hills Towers the evening before. His respect for Leon Arrau rose, as did a certain wariness within him. Arrau, he decided, would be a very bad enemy.

He made the run to the South Bay Marina in 38 minutes from the time he hung up the phone. Within minutes of his arrival, Shayne was escorted by a trimly uniformed young skipper aboard a mahogany catamaran with gleaming brass fittings, ushered to a comfortable wicker armchair in the rear of the cockpit and a Martell and ice handed him by a white-uniformed steward.

He had barely sipped at the drink when they cast off and the twin-hulled craft cut through the gentle waves of the marina like a sharp knife through butter. The big redhead settled down. What lay ahead of him he did not know, but he had every intention of enjoying the voyage.

Gulls circled overhead, the ocean sparkled with early sunlight diamonds, dolphins frisked in serpentine patterns and the air he breathed was both brisk and fresh. Truly, he told himself, a day to be alive. All he needed to make

the trip perfect was the deep-sea fisherman's gear stowed safely in his apartment.

Over the years, Mike Shayne had done a lot of deep-water fishing. He had been at sea in near-typhoon weather, had flown through storm clouds that made other passengers violently sick. Never once in his life had he felt need to take dramamine.

Yet now, on this velvet-smooth run, his stomach turned queasy. At first, Shayne battled the sickness as cramps began to assert themselves in his stomach. Not until his vision began to blue and swim did he realize that the drink which had been given him was doped. Pain turned to numbness, and he saw that the young steward was standing in front of him.

His last conscious thought was a fleeting wonder at the similarity in looks between lithe young Latin American males. This one reminded the redhead of the servant who had accompanied Alyce Wagoner when he ordered brandy sent to his room at the Towers the previous afternoon. Migue...

Then darkness fell and he knew no more...

When consciousness returned, Mike Shayne found himself lying in dimness on a lumpy surface. The light was sparse, coming through a small round window on either side and above him. He lay bathed in cold sweat and, from

the sound of gentle water lapping close by, plus the tapering curve of the walls, he judged himself to be still inside the catamaran, whose engines no longer throbbed.

His arms were bound behind him at the wrists, as were his ankles. His nostrils smelled pitch and lacquer to confirm his judgment that he was still aboard the twin-hulled yacht.

Too weak at first to attempt escape from his bonds, Mike Shayne pondered his situation. It had evidently been well plotted and he forced himself to consider who had done this, and why — furthermore, why he had not simply been killed.

The obvious who was Leon Arrau, of course. It was he who had summoned the big redhead to the marina, tersely and without explanation. It hardly required a Mensa-type high I.Q. to deduce that the financier had been moved to issue his summons by discovery of some new factor in the case. The detective racked his brain trying to come up with some reasonable answer to the question of what it could be, but was forced to give it up.

It appeared evident that Arrau wanted him out of the way at this time — also for reason or reasons that lay beyond speculation at the moment. As to why he had not been killed outright, there seemed two possible answers — either there had not been opportunity for

such disposal and his death postponed, or there was possibility that he was being reserved for some later use — again past speculation.

He rolled over, seeking a more comfortable resting place, and the movement caused his sickness to return. Cold sweat burst from his pores and, for a few unpleasant moments, Shayne thought he was going to pass out again.

When this attack passed, he forced himself to sit upright — though the effort made his head swim. His stomach felt as if he had slept on the edge of a sharp knife.

He examined the bonds at his ankles when his head cleared. They were of stout cord, wound three times around his legs and tied with what looked like a square knot in the dim light — to which his eyes were slowly growing accustomed. He judged that his wrists were similarly tied.

A glance at his waistband revealed that his Biretta had been removed.

He managed to rise to his knees from the folded tarpaulin on which he had been lying, began inching around the small triangular cabin in search of something which might help him win release from his hempen fetters. But the tapering walls looked disappointingly bare of hooks or sharp projections.

He had to rest every few feet as his progress was exceedingly

painful. But he kept at it until he had made a full circuit of the interior — without success. His knees hurt like hell and his hands were beginning to prickle from lack of circulation.

Suddenly, his knees slipped on the slanting surface and he滑 fell onto the tarpaulin, then toppled over on its edge, uttering a grunt of misery as he landed on something beneath it — something that felt like a dull prong. With resurgent hope, he righted himself and pushed at the canvas carpet with his knees until it was worked back to reveal part of what lay under it.

He was looking at the business end of a boathook . . .

How long it took him to work his way out of his bonds, Mike Shayne was never to determine — but it had to be a matter of hours rather than mere minutes. Mercifully, during that helpless time, nobody came aboard the yacht to find him.

Once his wrists were free and the circulation restored to his fingers, untying the cord around his ankles was relatively easy. Even so, the effort exhausted him sufficiently so that he had to rest, weak, wet and panting, before he was able to rise shakily to his feet.

During this time, there had been no sounds from outside the cabin to suggest anyone else was aboard. Shayne was grateful, for he knew he had made some noise

while flopping around like a beached sea lion. Mobility restored, his next move was to seek his whereabouts via the two portholes.

That on the starboard side revealed a portion of a dock to which the vessel was evidently moored. That to port looked out on a small cove or bay framed by a brief strip of silvery beach backed in turn by palms whose fronds hung motionless in late-afternoon calm.

Next, Shayne moved to the door of the cabin, whose ceiling was so low that he could not stand upright. The door was locked from the outside. He judged it had to be a padlock, lifted a foot and gave it a hard kick about where the padlock would be. On the third kick, it splintered and gave an inch, then stuck. Stooping, the big detective could see the hasp that held the padlock in the crack his kicks had made.

He turned, picked up the boat-hook, inserted its prong over the hasp, gave it a sharp downward yank. This time, the hasp ripped free and the Miami redhead pushed through and up a short companionway into the pilot house.

His search for some sort of efficient weapon was interrupted by a sound of distant voices coming closer. Carrying the boat-hook with him, Mike Shayne moved swiftly aft to the cata-

maran's cockpit and slipped over the side — not a moment too soon.

He was barely in the water when the newcomers stepped onto the dock. They were speaking Spanish, a language in which the detective was none too expert — but he had picked up enough of it in his years around Miami to catch the general drift of their conversation.

It concerned himself — his own name was uttered four or five times — and they had come, it appeared, to take him *a casa*, which he knew meant "to the house."

Moving very quietly, Shayne trod water along the far side of the catamaran. The slope of the vessel's double hull shelved outward as it rose, leaving an area between dock and boat in which he could safely keep doggo and avoid being spotted. He had barely rounded the starboard prow when the two men stepped aboard via the gangplank.

Moments later, the fact of Shayne's escape was loudly announced and, after a hasty search, they took off the way they had come, evidently to report his escape.

Now, Leon Arrau, the redhead thought grimly, you and I are going to have an accounting...

XI

PULLING HIMSELF along the pier, keeping his profile invisible,

Mike Shayne reached a concrete sea wall with a projection just above the water level along which he could move unobserved a full fifty yards before it disappeared into the sand. Certain the recent visitors would return quickly with reinforcement in weapons if not in personnel, the redhead moved with catlike speed, ignoring the complaints of his recently fettered body.

Gathering himself for the effort, he sprinted, crouching, to the shelter of the palm trees and tropical underbrush that marked its further rim. Even with the boathook, he felt strangely vulnerable and defenseless.

Having attained cover, he stood watching the pier in the shadow of a large scaly bole, seeking to estimate the dimensions of Moss Key. He had caught marlin and swordfish in waters around it, had flown over the private island many times in the course of his Miami years.

The key was roughly triangular in shape, with the harbor area carved out of the hypotenuse on the northwest side, toward the Florida coastline, which loomed low on the horizon with the city's flat-topped towers in silhouette against the setting sun in the distance. Although Moss Key looked minuscule from the air, he judged it to consist of at least two hundred acres, mostly woodland save for an area of lawns and gardens of a single great

estate with a half dozen outbuildings on its eastern side.

Leon Arrau had to be somewhere in the large red brick mansion the detective had observed from the sky. It was Shayne's grim purpose to get to him and wrench out of him, one way or another, the truth that lay behind the killings. If it was unusual for Mike Shayne to turn on a client, it was equally unusual for a client to turn on him.

Nor did he underrate his antagonist. Arrau's apparent candor in the Shoreside Inn the evening before was proof of the financier's suave duplicity. At the moment, Arrau held all the aces and face cards save one — the fact that Mike Shayne had managed to escape from his watery confinement and was both alive and on Moss Key.

He speculated on the causes underlying the eruption of murders as he waited for the next move of the terrorists. What Arrau had told him was almost certainly true — except that it entirely evaded the fact of his own duplicity. But it seemed unlikely to the detective that any operation on such a scale, involving two continents and millions of dollars, could have been put together without the fine organizing hand of a man such as Leon Arrau.

It occurred to the detective that he had not heard from Captain Phil Farley on the identity

of the young man who had tried to assassinate Shayne in his own garage two nights before — but the redhead was morally certain that the dead youth belonged in the Low Hills Towers case — if only because he was obviously a Latino.

He moved further back into the palm forest shadows as a jeep appeared from the end of the woodland road the redhead surmised led from jetty to manor house on the opposite shore. It was manned by a pair of youths, both of them carrying machine pistols. One of them, the evident leader, reminded Shayne both of the yacht steward who had served him the Mickey and of Miguel, who had brought the Martell to his room at the resort.

This time, he decided, it had to be Miguel . . . unless he were triplets. Evidently, Alyce's "jewels" had some deadly facets, the detective thought wryly.

He watched as the youths combed the yacht and the surrounding area, even putting the catamaran under way briefly to back it from the pier so they could seek Shayne exactly where he had hidden during their earlier visit to the yacht.

They brought the twin-hulled boat back to its berth, came ashore and stood looking about as if baffled. Miguel pointed toward the place where Shayne was observing them and, for a moment, the redhead feared he had been

spotted. But they turned to look in the other direction and then climbed back into the jeep to drive back whence they had come.

The detective decided to remain where he was, at least until twilight. He needed the cover of darkness to reconnoiter the house — also, from this post, he could see anyone who chose to leave Moss Key by boat. So he settled down to wait it out, with his back resting against a fallen tree trunk.

Relaxed, he still felt the after-effects of the poisoned drink and of his subsequent bound confinement. His head ached dullly, as did his stomach and for a time he feared fatigue would cause him to fall asleep and miss some vital happening.

But he forced himself to remain awake by concentrating on the case, specifically on Leon Arrau and his efficient, utterly ruthless young minions. He wondered, not for the first time, why any man as rich and successful as the financier should be even tempted to turn to a life of crime. Was there some hidden urgency, some need for a vast amount of cash in a hurry, behind it?

Or was Arrau's descent beyond the limits of the law caused by sheer human duplicity? You paid your money and you took your choice at this point, he thought. But he intended to find out before he was finished.

He wondered what the effect

of the criminal conspiracy would be on Alyce Wagoner when it was fully exposed. He hoped she would survive relatively unscathed.

He wondered also who was going to pay his bill when the case was finished. But from here on in, it had become a matter of survival for the big detective. He intended to survive.

The shadows were deepening as the sun dipped lower toward the horizon, and Shayne decided to begin working his way inland toward the big mansion where Leon Arrau lived. He moved this early, lest in the darkness he trip some warning device protecting the estate from intruders — although he reminded himself that he was on Moss Key at the express invitation of its owner.

Although the distance was not great, the going was difficult for approximately a quarter of a mile. By using the boathook to knock the thick undergrowth out of his path, Mike Shayne managed to reach the further rim of the palm forest strip, to find further progress halted by the areas of lawn, hedge and garden behind the large house.

He settled himself at the closest point where his cover could be maintained and studied the layout, helped by his memories of how it looked from the sky.

The ground floor of the mansion lay hidden behind a hedge plus the fact that it was situated in

a shallow bowl in the key's center, but its top two stories were clearly visible in the fading light, topped by a flat balustraded roof. To its right and left were what looked like a garage and some sort of small aircraft hangar.

It occurred to him that the latter could well have been employed for the final leg of Ramon Cortes' fatal last journey. Police and corporate 'copters were so much a part of Miami's way of life that one more would hardly be noticed. He again wondered when and where the earless Argentine billionaire had died — and how . . .

Even as he watched, Miguel reappeared with a young woman clad in denims — Juana the "efficient" switchboard girl of Low Hills Towers, he decided although the distance was too great for positive identification.

Miguel pressed a button at one corner of the hanger-like building, and most of the near wall rose to reveal a 'copter sitting in the shadows of the interior. It was Juana who climbed into the aircraft, got it started and taxied it from its nest, while Miguel remained behind to close the hangar door as the girl took off and headed for the coast beyond the trees in whose shelter Shayne watched.

The young man paused to look about in all directions, before returning to the manor house. Once again the detective feared

for a second or two that he had been spotted. Once again, the youth's questing eyes passed him by. When he turned, the redhead noted that a machine pistol was slung over his left shoulder.

In the last moments of twilight, Mike Shayne studied the big house, seeking the safest and swiftest method of getting inside once darkness had settled in.

There were, he decided, only two ways. One was to walk up to a door and press the bell. Since this was hardly practicable, he decided on the other — the roof. At the house's northwest corner he could make out a drainpipe that led upward to the gutter beneath the roof's white balustrade.

This was the method he chose — and followed once it grew dark enough to give him cover. As he moved cautiously from the forest toward the mansion's rear, making use of hedges and the garage to mask further his approach, he wished he had a better weapon than the boathook and wondered if he would ever see his Biretta again.

The boathook would have to do for the present.

His progress was uninterrupted and undisturbed until he had shinnied halfway up the drainpipe, when one of the young terrorists appeared suddenly around a corner of the structure, machine pistol at the ready, and walked directly beneath the spot where the redhead hung perfectly still,

not daring to move or even breathe until the sentinel was past.

If observed, Shayne planned to hurl the boathook at him and keep on scrambling — but fortunately need for such a clumsy resort did not arise. When the youth had turned another corner and disappeared, the big redhead made his way safely to the top of the manor house, stepping easily over the balustrade.

A closet-like structure of wood with a door stood close to roof center. The detective decided it must open on a stairway to the floors below and tested the knob, then turned it. It opened easily and silently to his hand pressure. As Shayne hoped, the young terrorists were not expecting attack from above.

Blessedly, the staircase was carpeted, deadening the sound of his footfalls. Cautiously, Shayne opened the door at its foot, found himself looking at a carpeted corridor with an abrupt turn at its far end, a corridor lined with four doors on either side. Bedrooms and baths, he judged.

The problem facing the big detective was, first, to discover where Leon Arrau was and, second, to get there. After waiting for sounds of life on this floor — there were none — he moved swiftly and silently along the corridor, turned the far corner and found himself confronting a broader staircase leading down to a more brightly lit hallway.

He was about to descend it when Miguel appeared with a tray holding used dishes and disappeared toward the rear of the house. Probably to a rear stairway leading to the kitchen area on the ground floor, the redhead deduced. Cautiously, Mike Shayne descended the stairs to the second floor, again thanking God for the sound-cover of rich carpeting.

When he reached the door Miguel had just come through, the detective tried to open it. It was locked. Big brave billionaire Leon Arrau, he thought — so afraid of a single detective on his island that he dared not go downstairs for dinner! Shayne, over his long career, had come to know well the paranoia that afflicts many wealthy men — but this was the most extreme case in his memory.

He studied the lock, a simple bolt action affair, and wondered how to get the door open without a betraying crash. His captors had not left him his useful penknife or anything else, including both Baretta and wallet. But they had not removed his shirt — and inside its collar tabs were celluloid strips that would serve.

He worked one out and slid it past the lock, turned the knob and opened the door — to meet the arresting light blue eyes of Leon Arrau, seated in an armchair beside a huge canopied bed.

XII

SHAYNE KICKED the door gently

shut behind him, heard the lock catch, looked grimly at the financier. It was the latter who spoke first, saying, "I don't know how you got here, Shayne, but thank God you did. I had just about given up hope."

It was so unexpected that the big detective felt his jaw slacken. If Arrau's relief was not genuine, then he had to be one of the world's great actors. There was no way the redhead could doubt his sincerity. Standing there, holding the boathook at the ready, he wondered why Arrau did not rise.

Then he saw that the billionaire's ankles were fastened to the front legs of his chair by handcuffs.

"I damn near didn't get here," Shayne told him. "That call you made me this morning led me into a trap. Why did you do it?"

Arrau's smile was grim. Keeping his voice barely above a whisper, he said, "With a machine pistol at the base of my skull, I was hardly in a position to argue."

"What in hell is going on?" the detective asked.

"The crew seems to have taken over the ship," Arrau told him. "I was awakened this morning to find a pistol at my head. I have been held in this room ever since." He paused to grimace, added, "Oh, they've been feeding me and every few hours Juana or Miguel unchains me and lets me go to the bathroom."

"What about your regular

staff?" the redhead asked. "Surely, you haven't been living alone here."

"Hardly." The financier sighed. "They packed the whole staff off on a vacation with pay. How they managed it, I have yet to find out. Somebody evidently drugged my food or drink last night. I don't remember a damn thing after dinner."

"They got me on the catamaran," said Shayne. "I had one hell of a time getting here."

"What do you suggest we do?" Arrau asked. "We're outgunned — and outnumbered, of course."

"What about that phone by your bed?" the detective asked. "Is it connected?"

"I suppose so. I don't know. I haven't been able to reach it."

"We'd better get word to Alyce Wagoner," Shayne strode swiftly to the instrument.

"If they haven't got *her* stashed away — or worse. I've been worried about Alyce. I'm quite fond of her, you know."

Shayne nodded, lifted the phone, heard the dial tone and called Low Hills Towers. When he got Alyce on the line, she cried, "Oh, Mike, I've been so worried! Are you okay?"

"Okay so far," he replied, thinking that Alyce's concern sounded quite as genuine as Leon Arrau's. He wondered which one of them was lying, said, "Alyce, listen and listen good — I'm coming in as soon as I can."

"Where are you?" she asked.

"That's unimportant, Alyce. What is important is that you get the two carcasses out of the freezer — right away."

"But, Mike," she began. "How am I going to . . . ?" Her voice trailed off in bewilderment.

"It's vital," he told her. "Sorry, I've got to hang up."

"What was that all about?" Array asked.

"That," the detective told him, "Was a call for help. Now, let's see what we can do about getting those cuffs off your ankles."

He found a nail file on a bathroom shelf and got to work. As expected, the task did not prove too difficult. Handcuffs are designed to be difficult only for the wearer to open.

"Thanks, Shayne." Leon Arrau stood up. "What next?"

"We've got to get the hell back to the mainland," said Shayne. "Think that twin-hulled yacht of yours can make it a second time without refueling?"

"She should," said Arrau. "I always keep her tanks full."

"About the servants who left," said the redhead. "How the hell did these kids pull that off?"

"At this point," said the financier, "I haven't the slightest idea. It's puzzled me all day, and these young devils aren't giving anything away." A pause, then, "Another puzzle — why have they left me alive?"

"I suppose you have heard of

ransom money," said the detective. "They've got one dead hostage on their hands right now — Ramon Cortes. I don't think they've been able to collect on him as yet. Otherwise, I doubt that they'd have turned on you."

"Poor Ramon." Arrau sighed.

"You knew him?"

"We have had dealings," the financier replied. "Poor Ramon — he had a very bad heart." Another pause, as comprehension dawned, "Those two carcasses you mentioned on the phone just now — was one of them Ramon?"

"Without ears." Shayne spoke grimly. "The other, of course, was Tony Barton."

"Those damned fool kids!" Arrau sounded ready to explode. "If I'd had any idea . . ." He shook his head, unable to say more.

Mike Shayne said, "How do you let Miguel and Company know when you have to go to the bathroom?"

"Mostly, I wait till Miguel shows up. But once I got him by pounding on the floor."

"How did you manage that — with your ankles manacled?"

"Oh" — there was pride in Arrau's smile — "I just lifted up the chair and let it drop. It's very heavy."

"Do it now."

"But, Shayne — Miguel said he'd pistol-whip me if I did it again."

"Forget that. Bang the chair



a few times and sit in it as if you were still cuffed to it."

It took a couple of minutes for Miguel to get there. When he came in, he looked angry, said, "So help me, Arrau, I'm going to have to hurt you." He moved grimly toward the seated financier, reversed his machine pistol

to butt first and raised it — just as Shayne stepped out from behind the door and brought the business end of the boathook crashing hard against Miguel's left temple.

Miguel collapsed like an empty sack of meal. Shayne stooped to scoop up his machine pistol, said to Arrau, "Let's get the hell out of here."

"How?" countered Leon Arrau. "There must be at least a half dozen others — all armed."

The redhead tugged at his left earlobe, frowned, said, "In that case, we'd better get out the way I got in — by the roof. Can you climb?"

"I've climbed in the Alps," the smaller man replied.

"In that case, it should be a cinch."

Cautiously, machine pistol at the ready, Mike Shayne led the financier from his bedroom. Miguel was still unconscious and beginning to snore, which indicated to the redhead he would be dead to the world for some time.

They reached the roof without incident and the big detective went first down the drainpipe, gripping it with both knees and his left hand, so that he could hold the weapon ready in his right. Recalling the sentry that had so nearly caught him on the way up, Mike Shayne moved cautiously, his ears cocked for the sound of approaching footsteps.

Again, he let the single sentinel

pass, slid the rest of the way, gave Arrau an assist and headed for the forest of palms. When the financier asked him why he had not taken out the sentry, Shayne replied, "Don't think I didn't want to — but it might have alarmed the others inside."

"That was wise. If we're heading for the yacht, I know a short cut, Shayne. Follow me."

They reached the dock quickly. The jeep was there with one of the gang sitting behind the wheel. Moving in catlike silence, the big detective slipped in from behind and coldcocked him with the machine pistol. He toppled from the jeep and Shayne, reclaiming his weapon as it was dropped, handed it to Arrau, saying, "One for you."

"Thanks," The financier led the way swiftly, got the catamaran's engine going. Shayne cast off and they backed easily into the small bay.

As Arrau was turning his craft around, a second jeep skidded to a halt at the foot of the dock and three more young terrorists leapt out and raced along the dock, firing as they came. Mike Shayne stopped them with a brief burst that sent one of them toppling into the water and caused the others to dive for cover.

By the time they fired again, the yacht was already out of reach of their short-range weapons, gathering speed as it coursed through the waters of the night.

They made the South Bay Marina in less than twenty minutes and there transferred to the redhead's Buick.

Nothing untoward occurred the rest of the way to Low Hills Towers, but the driveway around the central tower of the resort was alive with flashing police and ambulance lights. Looking concerned, the financier said, "I wonder who tipped them off."

"I did," said the redhead.

"But how . . . ?"

"That phone call from your room, Arrau. I had a visit early today from Interpol. They had been handcuffed by the Cortes family, but they kept their wire-taps on. To move in, they had to have information the two bodies were about to be removed from the freezer. So when I told Alyce to have the carcasses removed, I was pretty sure I would find them here."

"I hope it doesn't ruin Low Hills," said the financier.

"Something had to be done and you know it," Shayne told him as they got out of his car.

"You're right, of course," Arrau conceded. "I only hope Alyce is all right."

"Let's find out." Shayne led the way inside the building and up to Alyce's suite. She was not there. Back in the lobby, they encountered Captain Phil Flanagan, plus Peter Murray and Jeremy Arnold.

Flanagan said, "When I heard

about this, I figured you'd turn up. These gentlemen" — with a nod toward the Interpol pair — "tell me you've been a big help. Wish I could say the same."

Leon Arrau said, "What about Alyce Wagoner? Is she all right?"

"The manager?" Flanagan frowned. "We haven't seen her. She was out when we got here. Why? Has she anything to do with this?"

"Of course not," Arrau assured the detective captain. "Alyce has been as much a victim as I have."

They were still discussing the case when Mike Shayne pulled out and went up to the fifteenth floor to pack his few belongings there and head for home. He was not entirely surprised, upon opening the sliding door of the dressing room closet, to have Alyce Wagoner greet him with a leveled .32 revolver in her right hand.

He said, "Leon is worried about you."

"And you aren't, Mike Shayne?"

He shook his head, said, "Not you, darling — never you."

"When did you get onto me?" she asked.

He said, "Only today — when I realized you had Leon as another victim."

"What did that crazy phone call mean?" she asked.

He told her. When he was through, she said, "I guess I should have had you killed today on the way to the key. But then,

I've always been a sucker for a redhead man."

Shayne hooted and she grinned back, unabashed. He said, "Why in hell did you do it, Alyce?"

"Greed," she replied. "Greed and envy and a lot of other emotions that don't motivate Mike Shayne."

"Well, this little caper is over," he told her.

"Not quite yet," she said. "I've got plenty stashed here and there. And, sincee you were accommodating enough to turn up here now, you're going to be my escort out of here."

"You're joking."

"The hell I am." All the humor was gone from her voice.

"How far do you think we'll get?"

"We'll get where I want to go — unless you get cute. In which case, you'll be dead, Mike Shayne."

"How do you plan to get out?" he asked.

"Remember? I'm the gal who runs this place. I know things about it not even the builder knows."

They walked down twelve flights, took a lower connecting corridor to one of the other towers, reached another brief staircase.

There, Mike Shayne made his move, faking a trip that caused him to spin with outflung left arm, bringing the heel of his hand in a vicious karate cut to her throat.

His right hand grabbed her gun hand, forcing it away from his own body. Alyce uttered a strangled cry, then stiffened, causing the .32 to discharge a bullet — not into Shayne's but into her own body. Sound of the shot brought police in a hurry and Alyce was rushed to a hospital in critical condition with a ruptured spleen and other damage.

A few days later, the big detective and Leon Arrau lunched together in a private dining room of the resort. The financier was still looking shaken by Alyce Wagoner's death — though he did not blame Shayne for it.

He said, "It's probably a good thing. She had nowhere to go but down. All that ability wasted. A pity." He stirred his *cafe royale* with a tiny silver spoon, then reached inside his jacket and laid down an envelope with the detective's name upon it and said, "I believe you will find this satisfactory — though how can you pay a man adequately for saving your life?"



Private Ear

by JEAN DARLING

All Mannheim wanted was a quiet hour. Instead, he got an earful!

"WELL, IT WAS ONE of those autumn days in New York City when the wind was blowing the summer away —"

"Cut the crap, Mannheim, I don't need a weather report, the time is today and I know what city we're in." The office where the two men were sitting, separated by a cluttered desk, was bare, gray, official.

"Sorry, Lieutenant Barker, I thought you wanted to know what happened. Now let me see, the Friday rush hour was in full swing —"

"Look, you're not writing a short story, just give me the facts."

Mannheim hummed a few bars



of the Dragnet Theme. Barker glanced ceiling-ward, rocking his swivel chair, hoping the squeak would annoy Mannheim as much as Mannheim was annoying him. Barker disliked private dicks generally, Mannheim in particular.

"I had retreated into the comfort of the Commodore Hotel lobby, armed with the latest copy of *Mike Shayne* —"

"Busman's holiday?"

"I thought you wanted to know what happened?" After a moment, Barker nodded. It was always the same with Mannheim, never saying in five words what could be said in twenty-five. A heritage from his Galway mother perhaps. And now Barker had to wait for the man to light his pipe. He closed his eyes, his chin resting on steepled fingers. At last, Mannheim continued.

"I thought you were anxious to know what happened, so keep quiet and I'll tell it — *my* way. Okay — *Mystery Magazine*. My thought was to while away a comfortable hour or so until the mad exodus abated and I could board the commuter train for home in leisure. But I hadn't reckoned with the harried woman who pushed ahead of me through the door.

"After a quick circuit of the lobby, she dropped down beside me on the sofa. It was a small sofa, more love-seat size. In sitting, she rested heavily against my knee as she fumbled in her pocket."

Barker groaned and swung around to face the wall.

"Suddenly, she whirled and, thrusting a cigaret toward me, she said, 'My lighter! I've lost my lighter.' At first, I'd thought her to be a bit under the influence, but the small flame from my match showed a clearness of eye that denied alcohol or drugs.

"Thanks", she said, inhaling deeply of the acrid smoke and leaning her head back against the dark stuff of the couch. After a moment, she began to talk. 'You see that girl sitting over there across the lobby? No, not the redhead, the blonde in the purple pants suit.'

'Girl?' I queried.

"Well, of course you're right. Marybelle certainly isn't a girl any more,' the woman acknowledged. 'You don't recognize her because of those bug-eye dark glasses, but you will. She's my age, give or take a year or two. You don't need to smile like that — it's true. Even though she doesn't look nearly as old as I do, she'll never see forty-five again. Oh, excuse me, my name is Norma.'

"I took her hand and muttered something about being glad to meet her, adding, 'My name is Bill Mannheim.' I laid my card on her knee, but she didn't seem to notice. After a bit I took it back. Cards cost money these days."

"Get to the point, Mannheim." Barker spoke with impatience.

If I don't tell it my way, I'll for-

get something. Where was I? You know this'll be quicker, Barker, if you don't interrupt. I lose my train of thought. Okay? Norma was polite and waited until my voice stopped before continuing.

'Norma for normal — that's me. Dull, dull, dull, not glamorous like Marybelle. I remember her when she was a little girl and lived next door. Oh, not here in this heartless city, but in that other one on the other side of the continent — Hollywood.'

'She stubbed out her cigarette and went on. It isn't a pleasant memory, because she was always held up by my mother as a shining example of just how little girls should look, behave, dress — and make money. Particularly the latter. You see, Marybelle was a professional child.

'She took' dancing lessons — tap, acrobatic and ballet — singing lessons, drama and elocution. She also had three piano lessons a week. Monday and Thursday she went to Max Factor's, not only to get plucked and curled but to keep platinum without tell-tale dark roots to spoil the illusion.

'Everything about her was perfect, and all of us kids in the neighborhood hated and envied her. We made fun of her to her face as well as behind her back, because Marybelle had everything we ever wanted.'

'Norma stopped speaking, lost somewhere in the past. I sat there, trying to figure some way of dis-

appearing into my magazine without rejecting this almost hysterical woman.

'Then, as suddenly as she'd stopped, she began again, 'I need another light,' she said. I obliged. She pulled hard at the cigaret and the red glow consumed a quarter of its length. 'One sad thing — Marybelle never had time to play.'

'Norma flicked ashes on the rug and leaned close, speaking in a conspiratorial tone. 'I'd be willing to bet my life she never was even slightly soiled or skinned a knee, except for the time she played the little beggar girl in *The Lost and the Damned*, but that was only nice clean make-up dirt.'

'By the time she was six years old, Marybelle was a star and supporting her family in a style to which they were rapidly becoming accustomed. They had a fancy car, one of the unparkables, as well as several smaller varieties, mink coats all around and a snooty French Poodle called Mistinquette.'

'For a while I sat forward wearing interest on my face, injecting an 'oh' or an 'uh-huh' or a nod here and there. But at last I realized this woman was just talking, not to me, not to anybody, just talking. So I relaxed, lit my pipe and listened.'

'Marybelle eventually grew out of her cuddly babyness into a little girl, and we all heaved a sigh of relief, hating her even more because of all the envy we'd

wasted on her. Now her father would have to go to work, we thought. But luck was with him -- Marybelle went into modeling and landed the lead in the *Bobby Benson* radio serial, and the money kept rolling in.

"Each year I despised her more. I was obsessed with hating Marybelle. She was slender, I was fat. Her teeth were perfect, I wore braces. Her skin was clear, my face was one solid pimple. She was famous, I was not. I lay awake nights, brooding about how unfair life was and burning with shame at how common my family was.

"My father emptied coin boxes for the telephone company, my mother did the morning shift behind the prescription counter at the local Thrifty Drug Store, and my two horrible freckled brothers made me sick. Marybelle's mother never sold laxatives or acne goo across a counter. She was always a beautiful backdrop to Marybelle's career."

"Eventually they bought a huge new split level house in Beverly Hills and moved away. It would seem that was the end of Marybelle, as far as I was concerned, but it wasn't. Morbid curiosity kept me glued to all the gossip columns as though in terror of missing a single syllable about Marybelle.

"When she was sixteen she hit it big again in the *Mary Brogan* series, that soppy bunch of movies made in the late thirties and early

forties, and for a while it seemed every theater in town was playing a Marybelle film. Next, she landed the ingenue lead in a Broadway musical. From there she went into television. Her star glowed ever more brightly.

"During these years I acquired a B.A., a handsome advertising man for a husband, plus two assorted children. None of which stilled my hatred for Marybelle. It was a dull ache, ever present. She was the epitome of everything I ever wanted, I was the epitome of nothing. Everything I had was shoddy, second best -- even the children, who grew freckled, crooked toothed and pimply.

"Two weeks after my quiet, family-only wedding to Jim, Marybelle marched to the altar in a three-ring circus affair which linked her to a hotel magnate. The wedding was followed closely by divorce. In the ensuing years she had several 'miscarriages'. None stayed the course to join its sibling, a premarital mishap which had been shipped off to a Swiss boarding school as soon as it was old enough to walk.

"Four more husbands wandered through her life like seasons, all stormy, all brief, particularly the last. She was at least fifteen years older than her child groom, who possessed several golden discs as well as a monkey on his back.

"In beads and sandals Marybelle followed him from one rock

festival to another, watching with pride as he drove the little girls wild. One night, he managed to escape his bride long enough to be found dead in the men's toilet in Grand Central Station. An overdose the inquest said.

"His death really hit her hard and social drinking became problem drinking. She began missing shows and for a while it was the 'in' thing to collect tickets from cancelled Marybelle concerts and then, she was gone, disappeared.

"No magazines or newspapers mentioned Marybelle. Even more strange, none of her old films appeared on TeeVee. She was gone as if she had never been — except inside me.

"In the business of moving to New York, when Jim opened the eastern branch of the agency, I *almost* forgot Marybelle. Playing mother by day, hostess by night, *almost* stilled my envy. When the children were old enough, they went to a boarding school so I could follow my man wherever business took him. He said he needed to have me with him. And I suppose he did, in an absent sort of way. But Mom had always said she needed me, too — when she wasn't comparing me unfavorably with Marybelle, that is.

"Funny, though, how the memory of a day long ago when I was quite small sticks in the mind. It was before Marybelle moved to Beverly Hills, when she still

lived next door. We were playing in the backyard and my brothers were using me for a target to try out their new pea-shooters and I happened to glance up.

"Marybelle was watching us from her bedroom window. Her face was twisted with longing and envy, her eyes were filled with tears. The expression on her face so startled me I forgot to duck and I spent the next two weeks being a celebrity at school. You have no idea how impressed eight-year-olds can be by a black eye patch.

"Anyway, time ticked away and before I knew it my son was old enough to drop out of college and my pregnant daughter went to live with some man who made horseshoe nail jewelry. This last almost broke my husband's heart, and he began staying away from home, practically living at the office.

"I suppose you're wondering how Marybelle fits into all of this. Just listen and you'll see.

"Right then I wondered what Norma had thought I was doing. I had opened my mouth to say so when she went on with her story.

"It'd be better if you read her autobiography, a real wallower, telling all about her bankruptcy and the suspended sentence for shoplifting and all the juicy morsels about men picked up while she was working on becoming an alcoholic. Eventually, she found herself in a nut house somewhere

in upstate New York.

"A columnist spotted her in a photo taken of the Christmas bash given to the inmates and suddenly Marybelle was in the spotlight again. Well, to cut a long story short, she went to a health farm and a plastic surgeon and, when all the refurbishing was over, she looked wonderful and you have to hand it to her, she stayed on the wagon. There, do you recognize her now? She's taken off her glasses?"

"Why, that's —" I began but Norma interrupted before I could mouth the famous name.

'I thought you'd recognize her,' she said. 'Don't you envy me growing up in such a rarified atmosphere? Funny, she looked at me a moment ago without any idea who I am, no idea at all. It's a pity, a real pity.' Norma's face was a mask of hatred.

"She's a bigger star now than she ever was,' she went on. 'Has her own television show and is rehearsing the lead in a new musical for Broadway. She is a lucky lady — a very lucky lady! She's beautiful, she's famous. You'd think that would be enough. But no — she is about to married for the sixth time. The man she is marrying is handsome, successful — and getting a divorce. He is getting a divorce from me.'

"I opened my mouth to speak but she held up her hand for silence. 'Don't interrupt,' she

admonished. 'I've followed Jim for weeks now and every afternoon they meet here for cocktails.'

"Suddenly, she jumped to her feet. 'There's Jim, now, you'll have to excuse me.'

"She offered her hand politely, waiting patiently while I said how much I had enjoyed talking to her. When I released her hand, she shot off across the lobby to where Marybelle was embracing the newcomer.

"Norma stopped a few feet from the couple and drew a revolver from her coat pocket. For a timeless moment, the tableau was frozen, the adulterer, the mistress and the wife betrayed. Then Norma spoke.

"All my life you've had everything. Well, Jim is one thing you *won't* have!" Then two shots sounded, followed by screams punctuated by four more shots. For a moment Norma gazed down at the lovers locked in final embrace. Absently, she traced the spreading crimson stain with her toe. The shocked voices and pressing crowds were completely outside her world. She was alone.

"At last, she roused from her reverie and turned towards me and smiled, all hatred and frustration erased from her face. She was almost pretty.

"She giggled as the policeman took the gun away from her.

"It's a shame I couldn't have killed them on television,' she told

him, 'Marybelle would have liked that.

"All at once she noticed the ring of curious onlookers and, tossing her head, she took the young cop's arm in the fashion of a young girl on her first date.

"What are we waiting for?"

she said gaily, 'Come on, let's go!'

"And that's all, Barker, that's all I know. First time I've ever been a private ear — for free, that is."

And Mannheim left to get a commuter train for home.



MIKE SHAYNE PRESENTS — Next Month's Headliners

THE NAMELESS CRIME by EDWARD D. HOCH

NIGHT OF THE WHITE HUNTER by BRETT HALLIDAY
The New Mike Shayne Story

WATCHMAN by D.H. LASTINE

DEMAND NOTE by JACK LEAVITT

WATCHMAN by R.E. HALLAWELL

When Danny Munson wrote the awful truth about his home town of Emery, Vermont, a lot of its citizens wanted to see him dead. Yet what ultimately caused Danny's murder was not a damaging private revelation but his refusal to include in the sequel the one scandal he had not told.

A CRIME OF OMISSION

by PATRICK SCAFFETTI

THROUGH THE PINES along the side of the highway, I caught my first glimpse of Emery, Vermont. The town lay nestled in the valley as though the houses and buildings had slid down the gentle slopes until they came to rest in the basin.

A two-lane road divided Emery in half. Businesses lined both sides of the main street, and houses were scattered about in every direction. The entire town seemed to be no larger than three square city blocks. Quite a change from New York City, I thought

as I steered my Volvo along the winding road.

I was on my way to Emery on this June afternoon to meet with Danny Munson, one of the most promising young writers in the country. Two years earlier, I had served as editor for his first novel, *Veiled Souls*, and together Danny and I had turned the overly-long, unstructured manuscript into a workable work of fiction.

It was most unusual for the large publishing house I worked for to accept an unsolicited novel from the slush pile, but even more



unusual was the fact that *Veiled Souls* became a best seller and was eventually sold to the movies for a whopping six figures.

Danny had reported that he was now nearly finished with a sequel, and I was anxious to read the first draft. He had been very secretive about the new book, and I had yet to see a word of it. The last time I had spoken with him over the



phone was the week before, and he seemed to have some reservations about the progress of the sequel.

"But you *are* almost finished with it, aren't you?" I'd asked him.

Danny hesitated before answering. "Yes, but the writing isn't going as smoothly as it did with *Veiled Souls*. Tim, I'm afraid that my talents are drying up."

"Don't worry. Second novels always seem that way," I assured him, whether accurately or not I have no idea. "Especially when your first book is as successful as *Veiled Souls*. That's one hell of an act to have to follow."

"I'm finding that out," he replied sadly.

"Danny, I'm really looking forward to seeing the sequel. When do you think you'll be able to mail it to me?"

Another pause. "I've still got a lot of revising to do, Tim. Besides, I hate the thought of shipping it through the mail."

I knew he was hedging. "Danny, I've got some vacation time coming up and right now things are pretty slow here in the Big Apple. Why don't I take a drive up to Emery for a few days? That way, I'll be able to read it and see how it's shaping up."

"I'm not really ready to show it to anyone, Tim."

"Hey, that's what my job is all about — helping you, offering suggestions, seeing to it that your

writing goes well. I'm as eager to see this new book become a success as you are."

"Maybe you're right. We can talk about it more when you get here. It'll be refreshing to see a friendly face again, too."

"What do you mean?"

"People around here haven't taken too kindly to what I wrote in *Veiled Souls*. I stepped on quite a few toes."

"You also put Emery on the map. Even *Time* magazine mentioned it in their review."

"But nobody's happy about how it got there. A lot of folks recognized themselves in that book, and they know that other people spotted them too."

"Well, no one loved Sherwood Anderson for *Winesburg, Ohio*," I said.

"But they treat me so coldly that sometimes I almost get scared."

"Move away, then. God knows you've got enough money to live anywhere you like."

"Maybe I will move, Tim. Since mother died, I guess there really isn't much to keep me here. I can sell the house and relocate."

"We'll talk about it when I get there."

"Okay, Tim. See you then. There's plenty of room to put you up here at the house."

"Good. Plan on my arriving next Thursday, sometime after noon."

As I thought back on our conver-

sation, the road wound away from the edge of the valley, and I lost sight of Emery. I had never been there before, but I was looking forward to seeing the town.

In *Veiled Souls*, Danny Munson had vividly described life in a small New England town called Abbotsville, and no critic failed to note that much of the novel seemed to be highly autobiographical. Even Danny never tried to deny that.

From the vantage point of his first person narrator, Skip Richards, he had dissected the lives of several of Abbotsville's citizens and portrayed the secret sins of greed, lust and savagery hidden beneath respectable facades. If he had stuck a little too close to actual facts, I could understand why the people of Emery didn't give him a parade when he returned home.

He had captured the essence of the town, and the people resented it. One of their own had exposed them and then had the nerve to return to their midst. I decided that I was going to try my damnedest to get Danny to move.

I toed the accelerator. At twenty-nine, Danny was only two years younger than I, and while working on *Veiled Souls*, we had rapidly grown to be friends. I hadn't seen him since he left New York seven months before, to go back home after his mother's sudden death. I was eager to talk with him face-to-face again.

The road swung sharply to the left and began its descent into the valley. I passed a sign reading EMERY 3 MILES — POPULATION 315. I was used to millions of diverse people congregated together in a massive city, oblivious to their neighbors and sharing few common bonds. Emery would be an altogether different world.

From what Danny had written, all of the inhabitants knew each other, worked together, played together. Marriages linked Emery's families. Secrets were secrets only because they were whispered rather than discussed openly in the streets. Danny had further united the town by exposing those secrets to anyone who cared to pay \$9.95 for his book.

Ten minutes later, I drove into the town, feeling I knew its every nook and cranny. A few people walked the main street, and, watching, I was tempted to give them names from Danny's novel. I pulled into Emery's only gas station. The attendant reluctantly rose from his crate and approached my car.

He was a tall, thin young man, and his gaunt face was covered with acne that looked like it might have been terminal. Though the name Ray was stitched over the pocket of his filthy khaki shirt, I decided that this was Bill Stickney from *Veiled Souls*, the gas station attendant who had a strong compulsion to peer through windows at night.

He sauntered over to the side of the Volvo and nodded an apathetic greeting.

"Fill her up with regular, please," I said. Slowly, he walked to the pump and, while filling the gas tank, waited idly with one foot on the fender. So much for small town service, I thought as I gazed out my bug-splattered windshield.

"That'll be ten-fifty," he said a few moments later.

"Would you wash the windows, please?" I asked.

He made no effort to hide his annoyance as he set about the task.

I had the exact amount ready for him when he returned to the window. "Say," I said casually, "could you tell me where I can find Danny Munson? Everybody must know where the local celebrity lives."

He grimaced and mumbled a bit of scatology under his breath. "He lives over on Whitney's Bend." He pointed to a white house, barely visible through a mass of trees, sitting isolated on a slope.

I thanked him and drove off. I followed the road through town, noting the First Congregational Church and the Emery Police Department, and turned right onto Whitney's Bend. The Volvo bumped up the dirt road to Danny Munson's house.

Through a window, I caught a glimpse of Danny hunched over a typewriter. I beeped the horn,

turned off the engine and walked up to the side door. I waited for a moment, but Danny didn't show. I knocked. Again there was no response from within.

He must really be wrapped up in that new novel, I thought and walked to the front of the house. I had a clear view through the kitchen window. Danny sat at the table, slumped over the typewriter. His arms dangled at his sides. A meat cleaver was deeply buried in the angle between his neck and shoulder.

It took me a second to comprehend the scene. At first, I thought it was an illusion created by the bright sunlight filtered through the trees. Finally, I realized that Danny Munson was dead. From the looks of things, it wasn't from natural causes.

I made my way back to the side door and twisted the knob. The door opened. Inside the house, the air was warm and heavy. My heart racing, I walked over to Danny. The blood on the floor was still wet.

He couldn't have been dead for long. His forehead was pressed against the typewriter keyboard, and a beer can stood beside an opened box of typing paper. There was a single sentence typed on the bloodstained sheet in the carriage.

Like hackles rising on a mad terrier, the news spread through Abbotsville that Skip Richards was back in town.

I spotted a telephone and jerked

the receiver to my ear before realizing that I knew of no one to call. I remembered passing the police station on my way to Danny's, hurried outside, climbed into my car, and drove like hell back into town.

SHERIFF CHET DOBBINS was a paunchy, grizzled man in the neighborhood of fifty-five, and he paced around Danny's house nervously, as though trying to decide what action to take. I knew little of crime detection, but I was surprised that he seemed totally unconcerned about fingerprints and other possible evidence.

When I burst into his office half an hour earlier, he had received the news of Danny's murder calmly, almost as if he were expecting it. He had phoned a deputy and ordered him to meet us at Danny's house, then gestured for me to follow him. I tailed his blue and white police car back up to the house and, before we were in the door, the deputy pulled up beside us.

Now, more to himself than to his deputy or me, Sheriff Dobbins mumbled, "I told that boy not to come back here. I told him to get the hell out of Emery as fast as he could and not look back."

"Why was that, Sheriff?" I asked. I was just beginning to regain my bearings after the shock of finding the body.

"Why was what?"

"Why'd you tell him to leave Emery?"

"Because of that book of his, that's why. Just about everybody in town had an ax to grind with him on account of what he wrote." He seemed unaware of his grisly jest.

"Do you think someone killed him because of *Veiled Souls*?"

"No doubt about it. He rehashed old scandals and things better left buried. You could almost see the hate aimed at him when he walked down the street. And I can't say I blame anybody, either. Hell, if I weren't a law enforcer, I'd want some revenge on him too. He sure didn't spare me or mine."

Recalling the corrupt, beer-guzzling Sheriff Fred Dexter from *Veiled Souls*, I silently agreed with him.

"Emery's not much of a reading town — there's too much work to be done and too little time. But I can guarantee you that everybody who could read read that book. And there was no doubt over who was who. A few weeks back, a little old lady checked the book out of the library and burned it in the middle of the street. But, by then, everybody had already read it."

Sheriff Dobbins' pacing brought him behind Danny's chair, and he smiled grimly. "My point being that just about everybody in town had a motive, and any one of them could have found the opportunity to sneak up here sometime last night and kill him."

"No matter who did it, there won't be much grieving because he's gone." He turned to his deputy. "Gary, you'd better call Lucas Short over at the funeral home. Tell him to come get Danny."

As the deputy went to the telephone, Sheriff Dobbins peered over Danny's head at the words typed on the paper. Slowly, as though with difficulty, he read them aloud.

"Like hackles rising on a mad terrier, the news spread through Abbotsville that Skip Richards was back in town."

He shook his head, "Now what the devil is that supposed to mean?"

"Skip Richards told the story in *Veiled Souls*," I reminded him. "He was the kid growing up in Abbotsville who seemed to know about everything going on in the town. I guess you could say Skip Richards was Danny."

"That's right," said Sheriff Dobbins. "That Skip Richards was Danny to a T. But what's hackles on a dog got to do with anything?"

"From what I've heard, it seems to pretty well describe the reaction of the people in Emery when Danny came home," I said.

Sheriff Dobbins paused a moment thoughtfully, then chuckled. "By God, it does at that, doesn't it? Clever way of putting it, too."

"Did you know that Danny was

working on a sequel?" I asked.

"A what?"

"A sequel is a second book that takes up where the first one left off," I explained. "Danny was almost finished with a continuation of *Veiled Souls*."

"No wonder somebody used that cleaver on him," said Sheriff Dobbins. "Where is that new book?"

"I have no idea," I said. "You mind if I look around for it?"

Sheriff Dobbins' voice suddenly turned official. "Yes, I do mind. You let the police take care of this. That's what we're paid for."

The sound of a car door slamming caught our attention. A moment later a frail looking little man appeared at the screen door.

"Come on in, Lucas. You've got yourself a customer."

The sheriff introduced me to the local coroner-undertaker, then suggested I follow him back to town. "You weren't planning to leave for a while, were you, Mr. Rennolds?" he asked.

"I can stick around for a few days. Am I under arrest?"

"I wouldn't put it that way, but I'd like to have you close by in case there are any questions I'd like answered."

"Where can I stay in town? I was planning on staying here with Danny."

"Mrs. Hudson's boarding house is about the only place. Nice clean rooms and cheap. Follow me, and I'll lead you there."

SHERIFF DOBBINS WAS right. Mrs. Hudson's boarding house was clean and inexpensive. Mrs. Hudson, a plump, grandmotherly type, showed me to my room. The minute she left, I flopped full length on the bed and tried to organize my thoughts, which were careening wildly in my throbbing head.

Danny Munson was dead, murdered, and the sheriff seemed relatively unconcerned. I doubted that he would put much of an effort into finding the killer, who might well be a friend of his. The motive seemed obvious, and it was a motive shared by nearly everybody in Emery.

Danny had written about them realistically and carved them to the bone. Any one of 315 people might have swung that cleaver. The sheriff would know better than anyone who was most hurt by Danny's book, but it didn't seem likely that he would pursue the search too intently.

And the sequel?

Danny had said that he was nearly finished with the manuscript, and I had no idea of what had become of it. Though Danny was dead, I was certain the book could be salvaged. I could tighten up the writing and handle any needed revision.

The book would make a fortune. A sequel to a best seller which had caused the author's death couldn't miss. I felt guilty thinking about it, but I knew that if I

could find that manuscript, I'd have the biggest literary hit of the season. I was certain that Danny would have wanted his book in print.

I decided to return to Danny's house and search for the manuscript until I found it. Unless, of course, whoever had killed him, took it with them.

At ten o'clock that night, I walked downstairs and through the living room of the boarding house. Mrs. Hudson was sitting with a few permanent boarders watching a police show on a crackling TV set. Before I could get out the front door, she called out.

"There's nothing open in Emery after eight, Mr. Rennolds. You might as well pull up a seat and see how this program ends. I'll fill you in on what you've missed."

"Thanks, Mrs. Hudson," I said, "but I just want to get some fresh air. Stroll around the town a little."

"Well, you be careful, and keep the noise down when you come back in."

I promised her that I would be as silent as snow, then let myself out the front door. Outside, the sky was clear but the air had cooled off considerably. It would be very pleasant to walk the half-mile or so to Danny's house.

Not a person was on Emery's streets other than myself. Compared to the constant noise of the city, the small town seemed eerily

still. Lights shone behind a few curtained windows, but many of the houses were already dark for the night.

I made it to Danny's house in fifteen minutes and, once there, I had second thoughts on whether or not to enter. I would be breaking into the house, and Sheriff Dobbins had made it clear that he would handle the investigation his own way.

But he was supposedly seeking Danny's killer, and my interest now was primarily in the missing sequel. Surely, I argued, looking through the house wouldn't hurt anything. The hope of finding the manuscript finally prompted me into action.

The side door was locked, but I discovered an unlatched window at the back of the house low enough to crawl through with little difficulty. Once inside, I found myself in what must have been Danny's bedroom. A mountain of tangled blankets and sheets lay on the bed, and clothes were scattered everywhere. I wondered of someone had already searched the house or if Danny had just been extremely sloppy.

I switched on a lamp on the bedside table and went through the drawers of Danny's bureau. No luck. Then I searched the bedroom closet and under the bed, but found no trace of a manuscript.

I crept into the kitchen. Danny's body was gone but, otherwise,

nothing appeared to have been touched. Even the typing paper remained in the carriage of the typewriter.

As stealthily as a cat, I searched the rest of the house. I went through drawers, cupboards, even looked under the furniture, but the book was nowhere to be found. Danny had either hidden the manuscript very cleverly or whoever had killed him had taken it with them.

After double checking to make sure that I had left no visible evidence of my nocturnal visit, I crawled back out the bedroom window and lowered myself onto the ground. Disheartened, I walked back down the slope and through the town to Mrs. Hudson's boarding house. The front door was unlocked, but no lights were on in the living room and the TV was off. I tiptoed toward the stairway.

"Mr. Rennolds," Mrs. Hudson said quietly, and light filled the living room. She was seated in the same chair she had been in when I left earlier in the evening, but now she was alone.

"Were you waiting up for me?" I asked.

"I can never sleep until all of my boarders are accounted for. Did you enjoy your walk?"

"Very much. Emery is very peaceful compared to New York."

"I should think so, what with all the crimes taking place there." After a brief pause, she continued, "Did you know that Danny

Munson's death was the first murder we've had in Emery in over twenty-five years?"

"No, I didn't know that," I said. "Did you know Danny well?"

"Everybody knows everybody else here in Emery, Mr. Rennolds. His mother, Agatha Munson, was one of my closest friends, and Danny used to cut my grass when he was a boy. In a way, he was like a son to me, but he was always a strange one."

"In what way?"

"He was very quiet, pretty much always stayed to himself. A dreamer, you might say. But whenever anything happened, Danny would be right in the thick of things. He never missed a trick, that boy, and he loved to listen to older folks talk. He was grown up beyond his years."

"Did you read his book, Mrs. Hudson?"

"No, I've never been much for reading, especially a big heavy book like that one. Always too many other things to do. But I know what was in it. That book made the rounds pretty quick with my boarders and all of them were quick to tell me what it was about, except, of course, for the parts about themselves."

"That's understandable," I said.

"Danny should never have written that book," she said. "It did nothing but stir up a hornet's nest."



"Were you in the book, Mrs. Hudson?"

The old woman leaned back in her chair and stared up at the ceiling. Finally, she said, "Yes, Mr. Rennolds, I was in Danny's book."

My mind struggled to identify her with one of the characters, but I could associate this plump woman with no one.

"I believe he called me Enid Heithecker. Do you recall who I mean?"

"Yes," I said. In *Veiled Souls*, Enid Heithecker had been a mid-

wife who accidentally killed a baby because she had never before handled a breach birth. A few days later, the mother had also died. In her panic, Mrs. Heithecker had forgotten to remove all of the afterbirth. She had been much younger in the novel. It was no wonder that I hadn't paired the character with the woman who sat in front of me.

"I was a good midwife, Mr. Rennolds, the best around. But I was young, and I lost my head during the birth of the Winger's baby when things didn't go as expected. Both of them died. Just like in Danny's book."

Tears glistened in her eyes. "Danny should never have written that book," she repeated. "No good can come from it. Now, you'd better get up to your room, Mr. Rennolds, so I can lock up. Tomorrow's going to be another busy day."

"Good night, Mrs. Hudson."

"Good night, Mr. Rennolds."

The old woman made no move to rise as I walked up the stairs to the second floor.

ON FRIDAY MORNING, I had coffee with Mrs. Hudson and her five aging male boarders. Few words were exchanged around the huge oak table, and what little conversation there was concerned assorted ailments and possible remedies. Danny Munson's name did not come up once and Mrs. Hudson acted as though we had

not spoken at all the night before.

I planned on staying in Emery until Danny was buried, then returning to New York unless Sheriff Dobbins had other plans for me. I had no idea when or where Danny would be buried, so, after breakfast, I followed Mrs. Hudson into the kitchen and asked her.

"When, I really don't know. You'll have to check with Pastor Fredericks about that. Where, will surely be next to his parents at the cemetery."

Mrs. Hudson told me where I could find Pastor Fredericks, and I went out into the warm, cloudless morning. The shops were open, and people strolled along at a leisurely pace. They eyed me suspiciously. By now, probably everyone knew who I was and why I was here in Emery.

Pastor Frederick's church was a quaint wooden building with a high steeple. I tried the double doors first but they were locked. I crossed the beautifully tended lawn to the house next door. A plain-featured, middle-aged woman appeared at the door before I had a chance to knock.

"Yes?" she asked with a smile that gave more credit to facial muscles than feeling.

"Is Pastor Fredericks in?"

"Yes, he is. He's in his study working on this Sunday's sermon. I'm Mrs. Fredericks," she added proudly.

"Could I see your husband for

a few minutes?"

"Why, I think that could be arranged. Come right in."

I followed her through the tidy house to a door off the dining room. She rapped briskly on the door.

"What is it?" a man's voice asked from within.

"There's a gentleman here to see you, William, who's come all the way from New York."

I had not told her I was from New York.

"Well, send him in."

She opened the door and closed it quietly behind me. An owlish man sat behind a large desk in the cluttered study. Bookcases lined the walls. Pastor Fredericks stood up and shook my hand as we exchanged introductions, then gestured to a chair near the window.

"Sit down, Mr. Rennolds, sit down. Now, what can I do for you?"

Briefly, I explained to him why I had come to Emery. He nodded knowingly all the while I spoke.

"Sheriff Dobbins told me you were the one who found Danny. It must have been quite a shock. You are probably one of the very few people Danny could still call a friend."

"I hope so."

"I'm sure you know that, since Danny's novel was published, he wasn't highly regarded by most people in Emery."

"Danny made that clear the last time I spoke with him."

"There seems to be little doubt that Danny was murdered."

"None, whatsoever."

"That is very disturbing, indeed. Especially the thought that one of my own congregation might well have committed the crime. You see, over eight percent of Emery's inhabitants attend my church services and, in one way or another, Danny hurt each and every one of them in his book."

"Why, Mr. Rennolds, for a while after *Veiled Souls* came out, I had time for nothing but counseling. I almost felt like a Roman Catholic priest hearing confessions." He chuckled at this. "The people apparently believed that since their secret sins were available to anyone who read the book, they had better make their peace with God as well."

"Do you have any idea who might have killed Danny?" I asked bluntly.

"That's not for me to say, Mr. Rennolds. Sheriff Dobbins asked me that same question last night, and I gave him the identical answer I just gave you. Nearly everyone I know has what you might call a motive. Who acted on that motive, I will not even venture to guess."

"And all because of a novel?"

"Some call *Veiled Souls* a work of art, but can a work of art bring about such terrible results? It's not for me to say, I suppose, but I know of men who beat their wives for early indiscretions de-

scribed in Danny's book. An elderly spinster slashed her wrists because of that so-called work of art."

"Dirty linen was scattered about the streets for all to see. Even I was not unscathed. Danny should never have written that book. When word got out that he was returning home, there was talk of burning his house, even lynching him. And this from peaceful, civilized people."

For the first time, I was beginning fully to understand the impact of Danny's novel on his hometown. Danny had intended to describe life as he knew it, and he had succeeded. But I could not help but agree with Mrs. Hudson and Pastor Fredericks. Both Danny and Emery would have been much better off if *Veiled Souls* had not been written.

"Was no one left untouched by the book?" I asked.

Pastor Fredericks leaned back in his chair and thought. "Perhaps only one person," he said. "Sally Meyer. And that's surprising, because Sally was Danny's sweetheart throughout high school.

"He probably knew as much or more about her than anyone else in town, and yet I could identify no character that might have been Sally. I doubt that Danny acted out of respect, because he did not hesitate to describe numerous dalliances with other local girls."

"Danny never mentioned a Sally Meyer to me."

"The romance seemed to end with high school graduation. Danny just lost interest in her."

"Whatever became of Sally?"

"She's still unmarried. She lives at home with her parents and works at Harrison's five-and-dime store."

"What about the details for Danny's funeral?"

"He will be buried tomorrow. Lucas Short has completed his work. I'll conduct very brief services at ten tomorrow, and Danny will be buried beside his parents. There will probably be few people attending the service. I do hope you'll be there, Mr. Rennolds."

I ASSURED Pastor Fredericks that I would attend Danny's funeral and thanked him for his time. Mrs. Fredericks magically appeared and ushered me to the front porch. A long day lay ahead of me. I made my way back to the boarding house, planning to reread sections of the copy of *Veiled Souls* I had in my suitcase.

As I walked up Mrs. Hudson's front steps, I noticed an unfamiliar man sitting alone on the veranda. He stood when he saw me and said, "Mr. Rennolds?"

"Yes."

"I'm Duncan Lasher. I wondered if perhaps I might have a few moments of your time?"

"Sure." I pulled a wicker chair up next to his and sat down.

"Sheriff Dobbins told me you

were Danny's editor. Mr. Rennolds, I was Danny's high school English teacher. Ours being a small school, I taught Danny in tenth, eleventh and twelfth grades. I was most upset to hear of his death."

In my mind, I converted Duncan Lasher to John Divers in *Veiled Souls*, a dedicated bachelor teacher who was struggling with repressed homosexual tendencies.

"Danny's literary portrait of me was certainly unflattering and, I hasten to add, totally inaccurate, but I strongly believe that he was entitled to full artistic freedom. I can understand, Mr. Rennolds, because I myself am a writer."

Here it comes, I thought. Now he's going to ask me to read one of his manuscripts.

"I've never been fortunate enough to have any of my work published, but I still have aspirations."

"What did you think of *Veiled Souls*?" I asked, hoping to stall the inevitable request.

"In general, I liked it — liked it very much. The characterizations were insightful, some of the descriptive passages attained almost lyrical heights, and the dialogue captured the essence of local speech patterns."

A frustrated critic as well as a frustrated writer, I concluded.

"But it was the only novel Danny Munson could have written," he added.

"What do you mean by that,

Mr. Lasher?"

"Danny was an excellent writer, but he lacked the true artist's major asset — imagination. When I had him in class, I recommended to Danny that he consider newspaper reporting as a career. He was able to describe things vividly, but when it came to inventing or creating, Danny was definitely not inspired."

"In *Veiled Souls*, Danny merely described what he observed as he grew up and changed the names. He unearthed Emery's skeletons and put them between the covers of a book. I suspect that *Veiled Souls* must just about have written itself."

"You may be right. Danny once told me that writing the novel was like automatic writing. He compared it to a gushing wound."

Mr. Lasher grimaced. "That might be an apt description. I certainly don't mean to minimize Danny's talents, but I am sure he would have had a difficult time writing purely imaginative fiction."

"Did you know that Danny was working on a sequel to *Veiled Souls*?"

Duncan Lasher appeared surprised. "No, I didn't know that. I'd certainly be most interested in reading it. A continuation would have called for some imagination. Just about every iota of gossip from Emery went into his first book."

"Danny would have to invent

incidents for the sequel. I doubt that anyone around here would be concerned with a second book — all the scandal came out in the first. Have you read the new book, Mr. Rennolds?"

"No, I haven't. I came here to Emery to see it for the first time, but Danny was dead when I arrived and the new book had disappeared."

"Very strange. Do you suspect that someone stole the manuscript?"

"That's the only logical assumption I can make. Danny assured me that the book was nearly finished. Now it's gone. Do you have any idea who might have taken it?"

"None at all. Unless possible there was material in the sequel someone didn't want known. The someone being, of course, whoever killed him." A pause, then; "Perhaps, but as I said earlier, all the major gossip came out in *Veiled Souls*. Of course, there might be something few people know anything about."

"I've thought of that," I said, "but I couldn't even begin to guess who might have done it. And from what I've seen and heard, just about everybody in town would have liked to see Danny dead."

"I'm afraid that that's an accurate observation, Mr. Rennolds. And I've taken up enough of your valuable time. I just wanted to share a few of my

impressions of Danny with someone who didn't hate him."

"I've enjoyed our talk, Mr. Lasher, and I'd like to ask one final question. Pastor Fredericks mentioned that only one person wasn't hurt by *Veiled Souls*. Danny's high school girlfriend."

"That would be Sally Meyer and, now that you mention it, I don't recall a character resembling Sally. I suspect that Danny omitted her out of some sense of chivalry. They were quite close during high school. Perhaps too close."

Duncan Lasher thanked me, descended the steps, and walked primly down Sycamore Street. I sat alone on the veranda, thankful that he had not asked me to critique one of his manuscripts.

Pastor Fredericks' sermon at Danny's funeral was brief, and, surprisingly, not hypocritical. As a small group of people stood beside the grave site, he said that we should attempt to forgive and forget past grievances. He made reference to the fact that no book should have brought about the death of a human being, and he sincerely hoped that the person responsible would soon be brought to justice.

Several of the assembled faces were familiar. Mrs. Hudson was there with her five boarders who, I suspected, had come only at her insistence. Mrs. Fredericks watched her husband solemnly, and Sheriff Dobbins fidgeted

beside her.

Duncan Lasher, hands folded in front of him, did his best to ignore a fat lady who continually whispered to him during the sermon. The undertaker, Lucas Short, was there also, as well as a few elderly people whom I had not met.

A young woman with straight, shoulder-length hair stood a short distance away from the others. She was the only person crying. Her face was puffed and red and occasionally she drew a loud gasp of breath. I knew at once that this had to be Sally Meyer.

I had hoped to talk with Sally after the services were over, but no sooner had Pastor Fredericks finished than he hurried over to me and asked my impression of the sermon. When I turned back to Sally a minute later, she was gone. Mrs. Hudson came up to me to ask if I'd be back for lunch.

"No, I won't, Mrs. Hudson," I replied. "There are a few more people I'd like to talk with, then I'll have to be heading back home. By the way, do you know where Sally Meyer lives?"

SHE KNEW and she gave me directions. It was a ten-minute walk to the Meyer's, and I found the bungalow easily.

Mrs. Hudson had said that the house was in need of repair, but she was obviously being polite. The lawn was a mass of drooping weeds, and the once-white house

had weathered to a filthy gray.

The curtains hung mildewed and tattered at the unscreened windows. As I climbed the front steps, the wood creaked beneath my feet. I knocked lightly on the open door, and a man appeared. He wore only a sagging pair of pants and his fat hairy belly hung over the belt loop. With bloodshot eyes, he examined me suspiciously.

"Is Sally home?" I asked.

"Naw, she ain't here," he rasped, polluting the air with whiskey fumes.

"Is she at work?"

"Naw. She went to a funeral this morning. Her old boyfriend got himself murdered a few days back."

"The funeral ended about twenty minutes ago. Do you have any idea where she might have gone afterwards?"

"Only one place Sally goes other than work and home, and that's to the clearing in the woods. About half a mile straight back of the Munson house. That girl will sit there hour after hour, all by herself. Sometimes, it makes me think she's touched in the head."

I thanked him for the information and left. After a moment's debate, I decided to look for the clearing and Sally Meyer. If she and Danny were once sweethearts, perhaps she had spoken to him since he'd returned home and might know something about the sequel.

I returned to the boarding house, changed clothes, then set out to find Sally. The day was warm and humid and I was sweating by the time I reached Danny's house. The house was silent and dark. I tried both doors, but they were locked. Wondering how much effort Sheriff Dobbins was putting into finding Danny's killer, I headed into the woods.

The temperature within was cool and layers of moss and fallen leaves cushioned the ground. Small animals skittered in all directions as I pushed aside branches and shuffled deeper into the mass of trees.

I came upon the clearing suddenly after struggling through a thick clump of bushes. The area could not have been more than twenty by twenty feet, and it was surrounded by bushes and trees on all sides.

It seemed extremely bright after the dim underwater atmosphere of the woods. For some reason, the clearing was very familiar, though I was certain that I had never seen it before.

Sally Meyer sat on a large rock near the center of the space. She looked up as I stepped forward and said, "You're Danny's friend from New York, aren't you?"

"That's right, Sally," I said. "I wanted to talk with you about Danny."

"Why bother to talk to me?"

"You and Danny were once very close."

"Once. That was a long time ago."

"Did you see Danny when he came back here to Emery?"

"A couple of times."

"Had things changed that much between you two?"

Her voice took on a dreamy, faraway quality. "They changed back in our last year of high school. Danny wanted other girls. All of a sudden, I wasn't enough."

"And you didn't want other boys?"

"No — only Danny. He's the only boy I ever wanted — ever will want. But I gave him everything I had to give right here in this clearing. It was the first time for me. Danny said it was the first for him too. He lied."

I tried to picture Danny and Sally here in the clearing making love, and suddenly I knew why the place seemed familiar. In *Veiled Souls*, Danny had described the clearing right down to the rock Sally was sitting on. The narrator of the story, Skip Richards, recounted his first sexual experience with a red haired waitress. It had taken place right here.

"Have you read Danny's book?" I asked.

"Four times. He told the truth in that book, but he lied to me."

"You mean about you being his first girl?"

"Yes. I thought this spot was special to us. I thought it would stay special for Danny, too, even after he made it clear he wanted

nothing more to do with me. Then I found out he'd had girls up here before and after me.

"He describes being here with Sherry Leonard, Bessie Simpson and Paula Trondle. But he doesn't say a word about being here with me. I wasn't in that book at all. He didn't even write one sentence about me."

"A lot of people around here would have done anything not to have been in Danny's book," I said.

"And I just about went crazy with sadness because I *wasn't* in it."

"When was the last time you saw Danny?"

Her eyes searched the trees surrounding the clearing as though seeking escape. Finally, she whispered, "Wednesday night at his house."

"Was anybody else there?"

"Nobody but me and Danny."

"What was he doing?"

"Writing. He was sitting in front of his typewriter, paying no attention to me at all. I wanted to talk. He just stared and stared at those couple of lines he had down."

"Like hackles rising on a mad terrier, the news spread through Abbotsville that Skip Richards was back in town."

"That's it. He kept saying those words out loud. I asked him why I wasn't in his book, but he ignored me. I asked him to please put me in his second book, to tell

about us.

"He turned around and told me I was a poor dumb idiot, that he never really cared for me. He said I wasn't interesting enough to put in his first book, and he wasn't about to put me in the next one, either. Then he turned back to his typewriter."

"What did you do then?" I asked, afraid of the answer and knowing what it would be.

As though to herself, Sally said, "I was so hurt I didn't know what I was doing. I grabbed that meat cleaver on the counter and hit him. Then I ran away. I was going to tell the sheriff as soon as I left here."

"It doesn't matter what happens to me anymore. I loved Danny, and I killed him." She covered her face with her hands and sobbed.

I waited until she calmed down a little, then asked, "The new book, Sally, the one Danny was working on — what happened to it?"

"I don't know. I guess that one sentence was all there was to it so far. That's why I figured he could still put me in it. He hadn't hardly started it yet."

"Then there was no second book?"

"No. He said he couldn't get going with it. He kept saying, 'There's nothing more to write. I wrote it all the first time.' I said he didn't tell about us, but he said that doesn't even count."

Suddenly Danny's hesitancy to let me see the sequel made sense. He had never written it. Perhaps Duncan Lasher was right — a second book would have taken imagination, and Danny had apparently been short-suited in that department.

"I'm going to the sheriff now," Sally said. She stood up and disappeared into the woods. I didn't bother to follow her.

"YOU WERE RIGHT about Danny's talent," I told Duncan Lasher as we stood on Mrs. Hudson's veranda the next morning. "He was more of a reporter than a novelist. After *Veiled Souls*, he had nothing more to say.

"He tried to write about Emery's reaction to his homecoming, but it didn't work. He'd already written himself out. He couldn't bring himself to tell me that there would be no sequel."

"Yes," said Mr. Lasher. "It's all very strange. I was certain that somebody Danny had exposed

in *Veiled Souls* had killed him. As it turns out, he was murdered because of an omission. And Sally was always such a sweet girl. She must have hidden her passions well."

"I wonder what will happen to her," I said.

"I don't know. That's the sheriff's department. She's in his custody now." He shook his head sadly. "Well, I'd better be on my way."

"Good-bye, Mr. Lasher.

"Good-bye, Mr. Reynolds," he said as we shook hands. "I'm sorry your visit to Emery had to turn out as it did. It's really a very nice town. By the way, I was wondering if you'd be so kind as to look over a novel manuscript of mine." He handed me a thick manila envelope.

"My address and everything you'll need are in here."

"I'd be happy to read them, Mr. Lasher," I lied.

His broad, hopeful smile followed me to my car and probably all the way back to New York.



Deadhead Coming Down

Hitting the highways night after night gets mighty dull — so why not try the byways occasionally?

by MARGARET MARON



FUNNY THING ABOUT This CB craze — all these years we trucking men've been going along doing our job, just making a living as best we could, and people in cars didn't pay us much mind after everything got four-laned because they didn't get caught behind us so much going uphill, so they quit cursing us for being on the roads we was paying taxes for too and sort of ignored us for a few years.

Then those big camper vans started messing around with CB, tuning in on us, and first thing you know even WV's are running up and down the clover-

leafs cluttering up the air with garbage and all of a sudden there's songs about us, calling us culture heroes and knights of the road.

Bull!

There's not one damn thing romantic about driving an 18-wheeler. Next to standing on a assembly line and screwing Bolt A into Hole C like my no-account brother-in-law, driving a truck's got to be the dullest way under God's red sun to make a living. 'Specially if its just up and down the eastern seaboard like me.

Maybe it's different driving

cross-country, but I work for this Jerry outfit — Eastline Truckers — and brother, they're just that. Contract trucking up and down the coastal states. Peaches from Georgia, grapefruit from northern Florida, yams and blueberries from the Carolinas — whatever's in season, we haul it. 1-95 to the Delaware Memorial Bridge, up the Jersey Turnpike, across the river and right over to Hunt's Point.

Fruit basket going up, dead-head coming down and if you think that's not boring, think again. Once you're on 1-95, it's the same road from Florida to New Jersey. You could pick up a mile stretch in Georgia and stick it down somewhere in Maryland and nobody'd even notice the difference — same motels, same gas stations, same billboards.

There's laws put out by those Keep America Pretty people to try and keep billboards off the interstates, but I'm of two minds about them. You can get awful tired of trees and fields and cows with nothing to break 'em up, but then again, reading the same sign over and over four or five times a week's a real drag, too.

Even those Burma Shave signs they used to have when I was driving with Lucky. We'd laugh our heads off every time they put up new ones, but you can't laugh at the same things

more'n once or twice, so we'd make up our own poems. Raunchy ones and funnier'n hell some of 'em.

Those were the good old days. Right after the war. I was a hick kid just out of the tobacco fields and Lucky seemed older'n Moses, though I reckon he was only about 35. His real name was Henry Driver, but everybody naturally called him Lucky because he got away with things nobody else ever could. During the blackouts, he once drove a load of TNT across the Great Smokies with no headlights. All them twisty mountain roads and just a three-quarter moon. I'd like to see these bragging hotshots around today try that!

Back then it took a real man to truck 'cause them rigs would fight you. Just like horses, they were. They knew when you couldn't handle them. Today — hell! Everything's so automatic and hydraulic, even a 90-pound woman can do it.

Guess I shouldn't knock it though. I'll be able to keep driving these creampuffs till I'm 70. Not like Lucky. Hardly a dent and then his luck ran out on a stretch of 301 in Virginia. A blowout near a bridge and the wheel must've got away from him.

Ten years ago that was, and the company'd quit doubling us before that, but I still miss him. Things were never dull driving

with Lucky. We was a lot alike. He used to tell me things he never told nobody else. Not just the things a man brags about when he's drinking and sling-ing bull, but other stuff.

I remember once we were laying over in Philly, him going, me coming down, and he says, "Guess what I saw me today coming through Baltimore? A red-tailed hawk. Right smack in the middle of town!"

Can you feature a tough guy like him getting all excited about seeing a back-country bird in town? And telling another guy about it? Well, that's the way it was with me and him.

I was thinking about Lucky last week coming down and wishing I had him to talk to again. 95 was wall-to-wall vacation traffic. I thumbed my CB and it was full of ratchet jaws trying to sound like they knew what the hell they were saying. It was *Good Buddy* this and *Smokey* that and *10-4* on the side, so I cut right out again.

I'd just passed this Hot Shoppe sign when the road commenced to unwind in my head like a movie picture. I knew that next would come a Howard Johnson and a Holiday Inn and then a white barn and a meadow full of black cows and then a Texaco sign and every single mile all the way back home. I just couldn't take it no more and pulled off at the next cloverleaf.

"For every mile of thruway, there's ten miles on either side going the same way," Lucky used to say and, like him, I've got this kinny map stuck up over my windshield across the whole width of the cab with 1-95 snaking right down the middle. Whenever that old snake gets to crawling under my skin, I look for a side road heading south. There's little X's scattered all up and down my map to keep track of which roads I'd been on before. I hadn't never been through this particular stretch, so I had my choice.

Twenty minutes off the interstate's a whole different country. The road I finally picked was only two lanes, but wide enough so I wouldn't crowd anybody, not that there was much traffic. I almost had the road to myself and I want to tell you, it was as pretty as a postcard, with trees and bushes growing right to the ditches and patches of them orangy flowers mixed in.

It was late afternoon, the sun just going down and I was perking up and feeling good about this road. It was the kind Lucky used to look for. Everything perfect.

I was coasting down this little hill and around a curve and suddenly there was a old geezer walking right up the middle of my lane. I hit the brakes and left rubber, but by the time I

got her stopped and ran back to where he was laying all crumpled up in orange flowers. I knew he was a sure goner, so I walked back to my rig, broke on Channel 9 and about ten minutes later, there was a black-and-white flashing its blue lights and a ambulance with red ones.

Everybody was awful nice about it. They could see how I'd braked and swerved across the line. "I tried to miss him," I said, "But he went and jumped the same way."

"It wasn't your fault, so don't you worry," said the young cop when I'd followed him into the little town to fill out his report. "If I warned Mr. Jasper once, I told him a hundred times he was going to get himself killed out walking like that and him half-deaf."

The old guy's son-in-law was there by that time and he nodded. "I told Mavis he ought to be in a old folks' home where they'd look after him, but he was dead set against it and she wouldn't make him. Poor old Pop! Well, at least he didn't suffer."

The way he said it, I guessed

he wasn't going to suffer too much himself over the old man's death.

I was free to go by 9 o'clock and as I was leaving, the cop happened to say, "How come you were this far off the interstate?"

I explained about how boring it got every now and then and he sort of laughed and said, "I reckon you won't get bored again any time soon."

"I reckon not," I said, remembering how that old guy had scrambled, the way his eyes had bugged when he knew he couldn't get out of the way.

Just west of 95, I stopped at a Exxon station and while they were filling me up, I reached up over the windshield and made another little X on my road-map. Seventeen X's now. Two more and I'd tie Lucky:

I pulled out onto 95 right in front of a Datsun that had to sit on his brakes to keep from creaming himself. Even at night it was all still the same — same gas stations, same motels, same bill-boards.

I don't know — maybe it's different driving cross-country.



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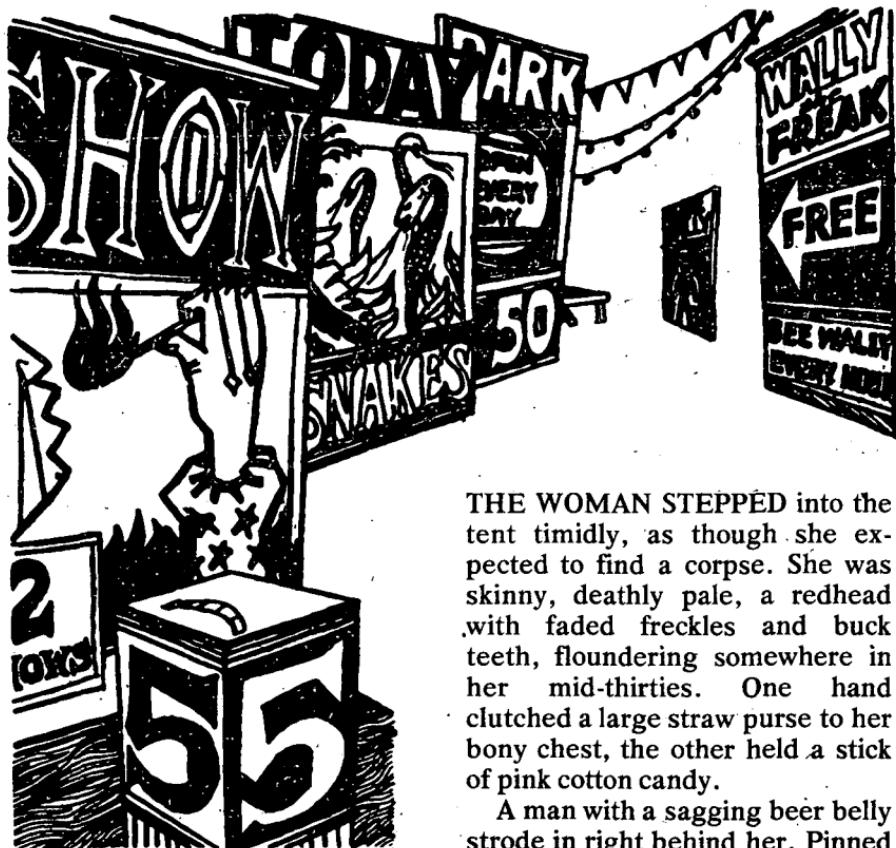
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April 333

High and Dry

by

RICK CHAFFEE



THE WOMAN STEPPED into the tent timidly, as though she expected to find a corpse. She was skinny, deathly pale, a redhead with faded freckles and buck teeth, floundering somewhere in her mid-thirties. One hand clutched a large straw purse to her bony chest, the other held a stick of pink cotton candy.

A man with a sagging beer belly strode in right behind her. Pinned

"DIFFERENT STORY"

There are those who claim the "little people" of Celtic legend were just that — fantasies created by primitive men and women to scare their children (and not a few adults) awake at night, seeking to pierce the dark ever-moving shadows beyond the lighted radius of grate or camp fire. Another school insists that "little people" were an earlier real population of Western Europe and Wales and Ireland, small of body, who took to the shadows to evade barbaric invaders they could not combat. In any event, in the form of midgets, little people are still with us and are still to be reckoned with — as Mr. Scaffetti here horrifyingly reveals.

to his plaid shirt was a button proclaiming him WORLD'S GREATEST LOVER. He wore a tan cowboy hat pushed back on his balding head and carried a big stuffed panda bear.

And they call me a freak!
I thought.

I was sitting in a miniature easy chair on a raised platform. The woman walked over and peered up at me. She twisted her mouth into a smile and said, "Hi there."

"Hello," I said, slipping a bookmark into the spy thriller I was

reading.

"Haw, haw, haw!" bellowed the man. "Just look at that little fellow, will ya, June?"

"Cute as a bug's ear, ain't he?" she said.

"You folks having a good time at the carnival?" I asked indifferently.

"Sure are," replied the man. "Won me this bear tossing darts at a balloon."

If the marks have an ounce of sensitivity in them, an uncomfortable silence usually sets in at this

point, but not so with this couple.

"Just how tall are you anyways?" asked the man.

"Thirty-eight inches," I replied for the five hundredth time that day. To hurry things along, I recited, "At birth, I weighed two pounds six ounces and was thirteen inches long. At the age of ten, I was twenty-six inches tall. Now, I'm twenty-nine years old, thirty-eight inches tall, and weigh fifty-two pounds."

"You married?" asked the woman.

"No, I'm still waiting for the right little lady to come along."

The man guffawed. "How long you been with the carnival?"

"Eight years, three months, and fourteen days."

"Clever little guy," the man said. "He sure does know his facts."

The woman nodded and nibbled at her cotton candy.

There was a pause, and I knew that the inevitable question, sometimes verbalized, usually only thought, was on the man's feeble mind. Finally, he asked, "Say, little Lenny, can you use a regular toilet?"

The woman giggled and elbowed him in the ribs.

"I have to stand on a crate," I said. "Would you like to buy an autographed picture to remember me by? Only fifty cents."

"Why, sure, I guess so," replied the man.

I slid a picture of myself grin-

ning idiotically and standing beside a yardstick from a stack of 8 x 10's and scrawled, *May happiness elude you always. Little Lenny.*

The man handed me two quarters and took the picture. Before he had a chance to read the inscription, I said heartily, "Well, good-bye, and enjoy your stay at the carnival."

"Sure will," said the man, and the woman followed him from the tent, still chuckling over his question about the toilet.

I glanced at my watch and saw that it was nine-fifty. The carnival closed at ten. I hoped no other marks would come along that night. The gawkers meant money, but I was tired and hungry and sick unto death of people staring at me in disbelief or sympathy.

Being the midget in a carnival freak show isn't a hard job, but after a while it becomes as exciting as watching someone use dental floss. The faces get to look the same, and I can predict the questions before they open their mouths. For fifty cents, the marks can come in, take a look at me, and count their blessings.

It doesn't do much for the old ego, but after a few thousand years, they say you get used to it.

I stood up from my chair, stretched, hopped down the steps from the platform, and walked over to the exit. The incessant blare of calliope music seemed louder here, and the midway lights

were garish and blinding, like a psychotic's nightmare.

Few people wandered the dirt paths between the exhibits, games and rides, but there was still a fair sized crowd in front of the *Give Bonzo a Bath* setup. From early morning until closing time, people flocked to Bonzo's.

Rex Connor owned and operated the joint, but it was Bonzo who drew the customers. Made up as a grotesque leering clown, Bonzo sat behind a fence on a collapsible bench and shouted insults at passers-by. For a quarter, they could buy three chances to hurl a ball at a small bull's eye.

If they hit the center of the target, Bonzo's bench would collapse, dropping him into a huge tank of water. Usually, Bonzo was able to so infuriate the marks with his taunts and mockery that their aim was off, but he fell maybe once every fifteen or twenty throws.

A full-time Bonzo did not travel with the carnival. Instead, Rex hired a new one for three weeks or so in every city we played. These first-of-Mays were often losers who couldn't find any other sort of work, and the current Bonzo, a twenty-four-year-old named Ted Larson, was no exception.

But he had a real talent for the job. He was able to antagonize people better than anyone I had ever seen. His jeers were crude and callous, but they hit home. Ordinarily mild-mannered fathers would savagely fling ball after ball

to dunk the clown and, on two occasions, I've seen men leap over the barricade and try to attack Bonzo physically. Only the fence prevented them from beating the hell out of him.

Ted's normal personality was cruel and abrasive. Even when he was out of costume, it was easy to hate him. For some reason, he never tired of baiting and humiliating me. Whenever he had the chance, he delighted in making me the butt of his sadistic pranks.

I detested him.

Now, Bonzo looked out over the crowd and shouted, "High and dry. Bonzo is high and dry, and from the looks of this bunch, he's going to stay that way. All you men throw like little girls. You're a bunch of sissies.

"Hey, you with the big gut and the cowboy hat, how about trying to dunk old Bonzo? Or are you afraid to let the lady see you throw? Come on, cowboy, try and hit the bull's-eye."

The man who had just left my tent handed the panda bear to the redhead and gave Rex a quarter. He picked up a ball, aimed and threw it at the target. He missed by a foot.

In a high falsetto, Bonzo cried, "Oh, big brave cowboy, *don't* put me in the water!" Then he jeered in a harsh voice, "No fear of that with old fatty throwing."

The man hurled another ball which landed even farther from the bull's-eye.

"I'm not surprised there aren't

any kids with you, tubby. You probably shoot like you throw."

The crowd of bystanders laughed uneasily, each privately fearing that Bonzo would direct his next taunts toward him. Sweat ran down the fat man's flushed face and glistened on his hairy forearms. In spite of myself, I felt sorry for him. His third pitch glanced off the edge of the target, but Bonzo remained on his platform, cackling joyously.

"High and dry, fatstuff. Bonzo is still high and dry."

The man paid Rex another quarter and threw again. His first shot was wide, but his second hit dead center. Bonzo's bench collapsed with a clank, and the clown tumbled into the tank; sloshing water in every direction.

He stood up in water to his chest and sputtered, "Lucky hit, tubs. I bet you couldn't do that again in a million years." He leapt up, grabbed a rope, and pulled himself out of the tank. In seconds, he had adjusted his bench and returned to his perch.

"High and dry," he shouted. "Bonzo is high and dry."

Forcing a broad smile, the man turned away and walked rapidly down the midway. The woman tagged close behind.

"That's it for tonight, folks," said Rex. "We have to close up now."

Bonzo thumbed his nose at the crowd, then noticed me standing by my tent. "Hey, Rex, let peewee

over there have a few free throws. I bet he can't even get the ball halfway to the bull's-eye. Come on over here, Lennie, and give it a try. Who knows, I might even fall in the water from laughter, you little twerp."

I wheeled and ducked back into my tent, furious at my impotence. I could hear Ted laughing hysterically outside. More than anything, I wanted to silence his humiliating taunts, but there was nothing I could do. Ted was tall and strong, ruggedly handsome. I was not a match for him in any way, but I swore to myself that I would never again smile good-naturedly at his ridicule while inside I seethed.

The next day would be our last day in this city, I told myself. After that, I'd never have to hear Ted again. There would be new Bonzos in the future, but no more Teds. Or so I hoped.

The midway had grown relatively silent. The calliope music had stopped, the carnies were quiet, and the rides had shut down for the night.

I peeked out of my tent, saw that the *Give Bonzo a Bath* joint was empty and stepped outside. Jerry Havemann, the barker for my tent, was sitting on a folding chair, counting the day's receipts.

"Going over to Edna's?" I asked him. After closing, many of the carnival workers gathered at Edna's *Traveling Delicatessen* for something to eat and conver-

sation.

"In a few minutes," Jerry mumbled without looking up. "As soon as I finish here."

I crossed the path to a long trailer next door to *Give Bonzo a Bath*. It was covered with lurid pictures of fat snakes entwined around struggling, half-naked women and fish attacking hapless swimmers. Neon lights, now dark, announced *Terrors of the Amazon*. During the day, a loud tape recording of people shrieking and jungle animals roaring, hissing, and gibbering emanated from the trailer. Now it was quiet.

I skipped up the ramp leading into the trailer and called, "Hey, Jake. You heading over to Edna's?"

The interior of the trailer was lined with aquariums and cages. Jake Morris, the owner of the exhibit, stood in the center of the narrow aisle, gulping from a bottle of Scotch. His head was tilted back as he drank, and his usually tense, gaunt face appeared transported.

"Jake, for God's sake, go easy with that stuff! You know what the manager said about boozing."

He stopped drinking, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and said, "Davidson said no booze on the job. I'm off work now, and, besides, this is my first drink of the day."

I didn't believe him. "Just be careful," I warned.

"Don't worry about it, Lennie."

He gazed around the trailer as though trying to remember something, then said, "Feeding time."

Like most carnival exhibits, Jake's *Terrors of the Amazon* didn't live up to its promises. Almost all of the terrors had first visited the taxidermist and were now arranged against painted jungle backdrops.

Vampire bats, exotic insects, spiders and brilliantly colored snakes of all sizes were distributed along the length of the trailer, and most were as full of life as a saloon on a Sunday morning. The lighting was kept dim to create an eerie atmosphere, but somehow it seemed more like my grandmother's attic.

In one glass-enclosed cubicle, a long greenish-brown alligator with gaping jaws glared menacingly as he rested on a papier-mache river bank. Above him, a thick fifteen-foot anaconda dangled lifelessly from a tree branch. Both were covered with a heavy layer of dust.

In a neighboring vivarium, an iguana, one of the few living specimens, stirred restlessly behind the glass.

"You must be starving, Adele," said Jake, bending down to open a cupboard. He drew out a container and sprinkled what looked like dead flies onto the sandy bottom of the vivarium.

The highlight of the *Terrors of the Amazon* was near the exit — a mammoth rectangular aquarium containing over a dozen piranhas.

The orange-bellied fish swam gracefully about in the murky water. Each was about a foot long and weighed in the neighborhood of six pounds. The chubby creatures looked harmless enough, until one of them moved toward you. Then you had a clear view of large razor-sharp triangles of interlocking teeth set into a jutting jaw.

"Are these things as ferocious as they're made out to be?" I asked Jake.

"Some species are, some aren't. All of them are unpredictable as hell. If you put your finger in the tank, you've got a fifty-fifty chance of pulling out a stump. These are from the Amazon Basin, and they're supposed to be the most vicious piranhas there are. I wish to God I could get them stuffed, too."

"Do piranhas really eat people?"

"Those little butchers have killed more people than any other fish in the world. A swarm of them can strip a hundred-pound animal to its bones in a minute. They're fearless, strong and can be meaner than the devil: Blood attracts them. They're the most feared creatures in South America."

I stared at a set of scalpel-like teeth in fascination. "What do you feed them?" "Minnows, chunks of fruit, ground meat — whatever happens to be handy." Jake stooped and opened another cupboard. He pulled out a large net

and a couple of empty jars and peered into the interior.

"Dammit!" he muttered. "Right now, I've got nothing to offer them but a belt of Scotch. I'll have to get some food for them tomorrow. Poor things are going to go hungry tonight."

Jake replaced the items in the cupboards and stood up. He turned and walked away, but I continued to stare into the aquarium. As I watched, one of the piranhas suddenly darted at the underside of a smaller fish and bit a large chunk of flesh from its belly.

In a frenzy, the other piranhas in the tank bore in upon the wounded fish, and their powerful jaws proceeded to tear it to pieces. Seconds later, the aquarium was peaceful again, and a fish skeleton covered with bits of flesh drifted placidly to the bottom of the tank.

"Let's get a move on, Lennie," said Jake. "I'm turning off the lights."

Shuddering, I hurried out of the trailer. Jake waited at the bottom of the exit ramp, carrying his day's earnings in a cigar box and the bottle of Scotch.

"You ready to go to Edna's now?" I asked.

"I'm going to skip it tonight, Lennie. I'm feeling kind of tired. It's been a helluva long day."

"Some food would do you good."

"There's only one thing will do

me any good, and it's in this bottle. See you tomorrow, Lennie."

"Good night, Jake."

He shuffled toward the small trailer where he slept.

Down the path, I noticed Elvira Logan waddling out of her tent.

"Hey, Elvira, wait up," I hollered.

Elvira is advertised as the World's Fattest Woman. The sign outside of her tent claims that she weighs 825 pounds but, in truth, it's closer to 725. Elvira is fond of saying, "What's a hundred pounds more or less?"

"You on your way to Edna's?" I asked as I trotted up beside her.

"Yep. I'm bringing the mountain to Mohammad."

Edna's was just a short distance down the path, and I could see that the tables around her stand were already nearly full. To a stranger, I supposed, the scene would look like something from one of Hieronymous Bosch's grotesque paintings, but, to me, the crowd was everyday fare. Under the yellow lights, the pig-faced man, the bearded lady, the alligator boy, and the walking string bean looked natural, the nodded greetings were casual and friendly.

Elvira found her reinforced metal chair, and we sat at a table with Michael/Michelle, the hermaphrodite, and Linda Vincent, the girl who changed into a ferocious gorilla before the horrified audi-

ence. Linda was a strikingly beautiful girl with a body you didn't quickly forget, and her ape transformation was brought about with special lights, a translucent screen, and a man in a gorilla costume.

A young girl came over, took our orders, and called them out to Edna, a chunky black woman, who worked frantically to keep up with the rush.

"And hurry up," said Elvira. "I'm so hungry I could eat a horse. You've got to really work at it to stay my size."

We all laughed, but I felt a twinge of sadness along with it. Elvira revels in being uncouth, as though to keep up with her physical grossness. Long ago, she must have lost all traces of self-esteem.

Our sandwiches arrived a few minutes later, and, just as I was about to take my first bite, Ted Larson and Rex Connor sauntered out of the shadows and sat down at the table next to ours. Ted had scrubbed off his Bonzo make-up. He ogled Linda and winked.

"Hiya, boobs," he said. He smelled of beer.

"The name's Linda," she retorted.

"Boobs fits you better."

My body tensed with anger. "Idiot fits you better," I blurted.

Ted looked at me, and his face turned mean. "Watch it, shrimp, before I decide to step on you."

"Lay off, Ted," said Rex. "Let's get some food."

We ate our sandwiches in silence. Somehow, with Ted so near, all gaiety had vanished.

Finally, I slid off my chair and said, "Well, good night folks. See you tomorrow."

Elvira and Linda both stood up. "I'm going to hit the sack, too," said Elvira.

"You two shack up together?" asked Ted.

Ignoring him, Linda, Elvira and I walked away. Ted yelled after us, "What a pair you'd make! A weasel and an elephant."

I felt the blood rushing in my head, and I began to tremble. "Go to hell, scumbag," I shouted.

Ted was out of his chair and dashing toward us in an instant. Linda stepped in front of me, but Ted dodged around her, scooped me up in a crushing bear hug, and continued running down the path. I wriggled helplessly as he carried me to the *Give Bonzo a Bath* setup, kicked open the gate to the cage, and tossed me up on the platform. I heard the gate clamp shut.

I stood on the suspended bench and looked down. The smooth surface of the water seemed enormously wide. There was no way that I could climb off without falling into the tank. I remembered that when Ted stood in it, the water reached his chest. That would make it well over my head, and I had never swum a stroke in my life.

To my right, Linda struggled

to open the gate.

"I've always wanted to be on the other side of this thing," said Ted. Through the darkness, I saw him standing at the throw line with a ball in his hand. Slowly, he brought his arm back, took careful aim, and threw. The ball missed the target by inches and smashed against the fence. Frantically, I looked for something to hang onto, but there was nothing.

"*I can't swim!*" I shouted.

Ted pitched another ball. It hit the bull's-eye with a smack, and the platform gave way under me. Before I could scream, I was submerged in the cold water, my arms and legs flailing uselessly. I opened my eyes to stinging blackness.

When my feet touched the bottom, I kicked myself upwards. For a second, my head was above water, and I gasped for air. As I began to sink again, I clutched futilely at the metal sides of the tank, certain that I was about to drown.

Suddenly, hands clutched the back of my shirt and yanked me upwards. I broke the surface of the water, choking and sputtering. Linda slipped her arms around my chest and lifted me from the tank.

"I'm so sorry, Lennie," she said as she set me on the ground. "I tried to stop him."

"You okay, Lennie?" It was Elvira's voice.

"Yeah, I'm okay," I said. "As

okay as anybody who nearly drowned can be."

In the distance, I could hear Ted's laughter.

Linda walked with me to my trailer. "He's a mean bastard," she said at the door. "After tomorrow, we'll be heading down South, and he'll be gone."

I nodded. "Good night, Linda. And thanks."

She gave me a half-smile and walked away.

Inside the trailer, I showered, crawled into bed and plotted. I had never in my life hated anyone as much as I hated Ted Larson. He had humiliated me and nearly killed me, and somehow I was going to make him pay. There was only one day left to get revenge. I lay awake, devising and discarding plan after plan until finally, sometime after three, I decided what I was going to do.

I dressed quickly in the darkness and crept out the door.

THE CARNIVAL OPENED to the public at ten a.m. I was in my tent at nine-thirty, standing at the door and watching the *Give Bonzo a Bath* joint. I was very tired, and my legs and arms ached from all the lifting and climbing I had done during the night, but I was eager for the day to begin.

A few minutes before ten, Ted appeared in full make-up, wearing cutoff blue jeans and a sweatshirt. He and Rex talked casually until the calliope music began to swell. The jungle noises started at Jake's

Terros of the Amazon trailer.

I heard a carny shouting, "You have to see her to believe her. Elvira, the world's fattest woman!"

Ted strolled over to his fenced in cage, opened the gate, and pulled himself up onto the suspended platform.

"High and dry," he chanted. "Bonzo is high and dry, and I don't see anybody who can dunk me. Hey, kid. Yeah, you. You look like a straw with an Adam's apple. Maybe we can get you a job here at the carnival."

The gangling teen-ager was with a girl who giggled at Bonzo's remarks. "Oh, go on, Gary," she said and gave him a shove. He hesitated, then dug some change out of his pocket, and offered it to Rex.

"Gonna impress the lady with your skill, muscles?" hooted Bonzo. "You and who else?"

The boy flung the ball awkwardly and missed the target by a good yard. Bonzo cackled with delight. "Is that your real hair, kid, or did you get a transplant from a hyena's armpit?"

"Dunk him, Gary," urged the girl. The boy looked very nervous.

His second pitch was another miss, and Bonzo's laughter echoed up the midway.

Red-faced, the boy drew his arm back again and hurled the ball at the target. Bull's-eye! The platform collapsed beneath Bonzo, and he splashed down into the

tank.

His grinning face popped up almost immediately. "Lucky shot," he hollered. "I've seen three-year-old girls who can —"

Suddenly, standing in the chest deep water, his face registered surprise, then fear. He reached down into the water and a moment later brought up a bloody hand. He screamed, reached for the rope, and slipped backwards. Water sloshed over the side of the tank, and Bonzo's head vanished beneath the surface.

When he appeared again, red tinted water cascaded down his face, and his mouth opened in a long, hoarse wail. His hands clawed at the rim of the tank, and slowly he floundered down into

the water.

Rex watched the scene passively, as though it was just another of Bonzo's crazy stunts, but when Ted did not crawl out of the tank, he began to look concerned. He hurried into the cage and stared down into the water.

"Oh, my God!" he gasped, his features contorted in horror.

Next door, a man with a young boy came out of the *Terrors of the Amazon* trailer and walked over to Jake.

"So where's the piranhas you got advertised? You've got nothing but an empty aquarium in there."

I ducked back into my tent and waited for the first mark of the day to appear.



RETAIL DISPLAY ALLOWANCE

TO MAGAZINE RETAILERS:

MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY Magazine is pleased to announce its "Retail Display Allowance Plan" available to retailers interested in earning a display allowance on MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY Magazine. To obtain details and a copy of the formal contract, please write to the Marketing Department, Kable News Company, Inc., 777 Third Avenue, New York, New York 10017, our national distributor, who will act as administrator of our plan. Under our Retail Display Allowance Plan, in consideration for fulfilling conditions of the agreement, you will be entitled to receive a display allowance. This plan will become effective for all issues you receive subsequent to written acceptance on our behalf of your application.

Cold Deal

What makes two big-time gamblers give up all they have lived for? Money, even life? Officer Reynolds comes up with the answer — a girl in a circus clown's suit.

by MOSS TADRACK

THE ROOM WAS WHITE, the bedspread green. Jack Diamond hated both colors. From Mexico City to Eddy Street made him one rotten fall, even if to some small extent Helen Marble compensated. In features and dress, she might have been another Eddy Street hooker, but Helen, who did a gig as a female clown, had never turned a trick in her life. She never would. Jack poured her a cup of coffee.

"Who killed him?"

She accepted the cup before shrugging negatively.

"Was he here only a week?"

"Yeah."

"Nobody knew his other name?"

"No."

A knock disturbed them. When



Jack opened up, he found a cop. The cop removed his visored cap and asked if he might come in. Helen said sure, why not. The cop walked in, with his Magnum swinging from his right hip, his walkie-talkie from his left.

"Sorry to bother you folks. Call me a beat cop." He lowered himself into a chair. "Hope I'm not intruding. Got some coffee?"

Officer Scott Reynolds was heavy set. His hair was blonde, short on top. His eyes were the blue of old china.

"Like I said. Don't want to bother you folks. I got to him first. It was a fluke. Shouldn't have been in this area. But we had a call about some hooker rolling a guy. I heard the shot myself and hurried in."

He sipped his coffee and didn't look at either Jack or Helen. He seemed to be studying Helen's shelf of paperbacks. "I write poetry. Published in the Berkeley *Barb*. Funny thing about that case upstairs.

"The Big Ones want it hushed up. Joe Gattori. It was Joe, you know. L.A. wanted him. The Feds wanted him. Entered here as Don Kearny. Funny thing, huh? His own name, and him a wanted man. A shotgun killing, and they want to write it off. Why?"

Neither Jack nor Helen said a word.

"Your guess is as good as mine. I don't know why. You don't remember me, do you, Jack? L.A.

Before you went to Hot Springs, Arkansas. Before you gave up *blue* uniforms for *green* money. And you sure made bundles."

"What do you want?" Jack's lips set thin and his jaw tight. "What?"

"Nothing much. I found me a deck of cards. I want you to take a look at them."

"Why?"

"You had a lot of pull in Mexico. I think your pull down there surprised the boys more than anything. You got away with it. How much income tax did the Feds want from you?"

"Friend, you got me mixed up with somebody else."

"Joe Gattori — Don Kearny, ran this town for five years. Him and his buddies. Before he moved to Mexico. Strange how he pulled back in here. It's even more strange how he ends up in a fleabag hotel. No money. No nothing. Not even his life. Don't you figure it kinda strange, Jack?"

"I never knew him."

"The Distrito Federales Police say different. Jack Diamond and Joe Gattori had a run-in six months ago. Cost them both a bundle. Broke both of them. Both of them took off for parts unknown."

Helen reached for the coffee pot and poured her cup full. She stirred in three teaspoonfuls of sugar. Officer Reynolds watched her movements.

"Helen, Miss Marble, I under-

stand you knew them both. Back in Iowa? Back before you came out to the West Coast and came up with your act. I don't mean anything by it. I'm not knocking it, mind you. Not at all. My kids saw you once, they loved you. Birthday parties and . . ."

Jack got up from the bed and paced over to the window. The window was yellow with dirt and concealed a planterbox full of dead geraniums on the sill outside. Jack had his old service gun tucked behind the commode in the bathroom, but he knew he would never reach it. But maybe he didn't have to reach it.

"What about them cards?"

"I hit the street right after Joe got it. The sun was bright. The street was warm. You could smell a kinda blue magic in the air. First card I found was the queen of spades. Cards littered up and down the street. I finally got the whole deck. Even the joker. So I got me the feeling . . . Cards when they are packaged by the manufacturer are always in a definite order. Right?"

"Yeah," Helen said, "That's right."

"Do you know what it is?"

"Sure."

Officer Reynolds held the cards out to her. Jack didn't say anything. Helen shuffled the deck, fanned it, then arranged it by suits, a second's work. She handed him the deck.

"Thanks." Reynolds took it and

sat there with the deck held firmly between his thumb and forefinger.

"It had to be a shotgun. Made it look like a Mob killing. It had to be a lot at stake. Something more than a flea bag hotel. Right?"

Jack stared out the window, keeping his back to them both. A taxicab stood in the street, honking for some hooker, but it meant no more to him than it did to Helen or to Reynolds.

"Are you done?" Jack asked.

"No."

"I didn't think you were." Jack returned to the bed, sat on the mattress, keeping his back ramrod straight. "You cops are all the same."

"You didn't do it?"

"No."

"What about Helen?"

"No."

"Why does Helen put up with you?"

"It's a long story. You wouldn't understand."

"I can guess. It had to be back in Iowa. You grew up together. You understood each other. You went one way. She went another. You came back to the States. Back here. Because of Helen. Right?"

Jack didn't answer. Helen sipped her coffee. A hint of a smile crossed her face, but it was only a hint.

"Maybe," Jack said. "Maybe. What about the cards?"

"For a long time, I didn't figure it. What was there to figure? The inspectors got nothing out of the

room. The shotgun was gone. There were no clues. It was a fluke. I mean me picking the cards up in the street. A fluke. I'm not even in Homicide. I'm a —"

"Yeah, like you said. You're a beat cop."

"Are you married?" Helen asked.

It was Reynolds' turn to swing and look at her with surprise. "Yeah. I told you I had kids, didn't I? Yeah, I'm married."

"But you don't live at home."

"No."

"Reynolds, let me see those cards." Jack reached out for them and waited.

Without looking at Jack, Reynolds reached over and handed him the deck. Jack took them and held them tight. "They're not Joe's. Joe never played with a Bicycle deck in his life. The killer didn't know that, huh?"

"No."

"How did you know it?"

"I checked with some people in Mexico. They knew all the right answers."

Jack slowly moved the deck back and forth so that the weak 40-watt bulb overhead caught the deck. Across the edge of the deck someone had drawn a diamond with a black marking pen.

"So that's why you came to me?"

"Yeah."

"But you didn't come to finger me for Joe's killing?"

"No."

Helen stood up and walked to the window. Her walk was tall, graceful, confident. Her thin back expressed great strength and power. From her back it would have been impossible for either of the two men to recognize her great miming talent as a clown. For her back stated only one thing — to Hell with the World! She stayed there staring through yellow glass into the street. She ignored them both.

"First, I had to know *what*? I mean *what* it was that made Joe important. Made you important. What was it? And that took some figuring. What is there for you gamblers other than money? And here both of you end up stone broke. Both down and out! *What?*"

"Okay, so what?"

"It had to be something stronger than money. It had to bring both of you to this same hotel. It had to be Helen . . ."

Jack tossed the deck of cards towards Reynolds, who didn't even reach out to try and catch them. His hand went down and stroked the butt of his Magnum, but his gesture was only casual, not studied.

"Yeah, Helen! You knew her first. Then Don Kearny — Joe Gattori, knew her. He was in this town for all those five years before he went off to Mexico City. He was another farm kid straight out of the Iowa corn belt."

"But Helen didn't —"

"Didn't sleep with him? It didn't matter, actually, whether she did or not. Don was more dependent on her for another reason. She made him relax, made him overcome his shyness. It took her clown's touch —"

Jack stood up.

"Sit down."

Jack sat down.

"Joe approached her first. He wanted her to do the job for him. Take off the final sting. He couldn't stand you being here too. Helen was to be his solution. He got her the shotgun. He got her the whole plot. He even dreamed up the card trick. But she didn't play his hand."

Jack sat there dazed, abstracted. "The shotgun?"

"It's right out there. Right outside the window. Buried in the planter box."

"But why?"

Sullivan stood up and glanced at the figure at the window. "Hard to figure. It would have been okay I guess if you hadn't taken to playing cards with Joe. Trying to kill time. Helen didn't like that. You and Joe were two-timing her. Taking something away from her."

Helen swung around. "Okay, Cop, let's go. I've read your poetry in the *Barb*. It stinks."



Conditioned To Kill

by J.F. PEIRCE

The games athletes play keep getting more and more deadly. But compared to this mental thrill game, even ice hockey and pro football are for gentle old ladies and the smallest of children.

THE WILDCAT STRIKE had dragged on for three months. Less than half the workers had gone out. The others had been able to sustain a sufficient level of production so that the management refused to bargain.

The strikers had received no support from their union. Their resources had been used up, and there were the usual charges that the union's leaders were sleeping with the management.

Though the police did their best to keep the plant entrance open, pickets filled the U-shaped entranceway like clusters of grapes in a shallow bowl.

A non-striker attempted to drive through the gate, and the strikers swarmed over his car, stinging it with the poles of their strike posters. Obscenities and cries of "Scab!" exploded around him.

As the driver inched his car forward, tempers flared under the morning sun. The strikers started to rock the car — trying to tip it over. But before they could, the police charged, nightsticks swinging.

News photographers and TV cameramen flooded across the highway, hoping to capture the strikers' frustration, the driver's

fear.

Reluctantly the strikers gave before the policeman's nightsticks, and the driver hit the gas pedal, causing his car to leap forward.

A bottle of red paint broke against the car as it disappeared through the gate, and the car seemed to bleed from the wound.

From the crowd's fringes came cries of warning as an accelerating vehicle hurtled toward them — but the cries were lost among the



shouts of the strikers.

When it was over, bodies lay strewn like petals stripped from a flower along the automobile's path.

"YOU SHOULD HAVE seen it," Sergeant White said. "It was *horrible*! Like watching a bowling ball hit the pins — one body hitting another, knocking it into the fence to carom off and hit a third."

"It doesn't make sense," Lieutenant Flanagan said. "The driver is seventeen. He has nothing to do with the plant. The only complaint he *could* have is that he was bumped from a summer job two years ago because he was non-union. *Still* he admits that he drove into the crowd deliberately."

An officer entered, handed Captain Hendler an Interpol release, then left.

Hendler skimmed it. "Call it coincidence!" he said. "Interpol says there's been a rash of cars being driven into crowds. According to its computer, such incidents are up over one thousand percent. The funny thing about them is that in most cases the killed and injured were bystanders — not those involved in what was going on."

"That's the way it was this morning," Flanagan said. "Not one striker was hit. The killed and injured were reporters, cameramen, spectators."

Hendler frowned, picked up the newspaper he'd been reading when Flanagan and White had entered, flipped through it till he found what he was looking for.

"This is a new service release," he said. "If *they* haven't appeared in your city, they soon will! If your city has one or more places for the idle young to compete against pinball machines and other games of skill, usually to the accompaniment of a blaring juke box, you'll find them there now or in the near future.

"What are *they*? *They* are the new games of death and destruction that are *supposed* to relieve one's tensions and test his reaction time and skill at driving. At least that's how they're advertised.

"Each of these games has had a number of relatively innocent forerunners. But *they* appear to be anything *but* innocent. One such game is called "Death Ride" and provides "the driver" the opportunity to run down pedestrians trying to flee from his path and to force other vehicles off the road.

"If the driver succeeds in running down a pedestrian, he is rewarded with a scream and the sight of a mangled body in a pool of blood before him on the screen. If he forces a car off the road, he hears the sound of five thousand dollars' worth of machinery being reduced to a one hundred dollar pile of junk.

" 'For a quarter, the player receives a minute's pleasure. During that time, if he is sufficiently skilled, he can kill, maim or scare the hell out of twenty pedestrians and turn a total of ten cars into junk.

" 'If an opponent's car is sufficiently mangled, the player gets credit for its driver's death. There are extra points for passenger kills when the opponent's car is struck in just the right places.

" 'But if the player is forced off the road, loses control of his own car or hits an opponent's car head on, he receives an electric shock. The game screen goes dark, and he must insert another quarter in the machine if he wishes to continue to play.

" 'Similar games substitute crosses for mangled bodies and the screams of victims are less realistic and therefore less satisfying.

" 'These games have drawn complaints from school and religious organizations in several states. They have been withdrawn from some cities because of sentiment against them.

" 'Surprisingly, adults seem to enjoy the sounds of the rending metal and the screams of the killed and maimed even more than do teenagers.

" 'Dr. Eugene Aydelotte, the eminent psychologist, says that such games are adding to the growing trend toward violence. He feels that every driver can relate

to the experiences provided by the games, that they are not fantasy, but a kind of warped reality.

" 'Operators of the establishments where the games are played say that these games are little different from their forerunners — such games as aerial dogfights and tank battles being typical examples. The pedestrians run over are referred to as gremlins or humanoids but, to this reporter, they looked quite real — like you or me or the couple next door.

" 'If the driver succeeds in running down a pedestrian, he is rewarded with a scream and the sight of a mangled body in a pool of blood before him on the screen. If he forces a car off the road, he hears the sound of five thousand dollars' worth of machinery being reduced to a one hundred dollar pile of junk.

machine, I might have.

" 'Distributors of the games say that they provide a "needed release from frustration" and allow the player to "work out his aggression in a socially acceptable manner — like football — rather than actually running over real people."

" 'Look for these games! Make your own value judgments with respect to them! Try them! Who knows? You may even like them!'"

Captain Hendler put down the paper and looked at the two officers without speaking.

" 'You think there's a relation

between these games and Interpol's report?" To what happened today?" Flanagan asked.

"What do you think?"

"You can't be serious!"

"Can't I? I was never *more* serious. I've a gut instinct and I never ignore a gut instinct. Check it out!"

"In uniform?" White asked.

"No. This is unofficial. Get five dollars from petty cash. Check an unmarked car out of the motorpool. Play some other game first if they have one of these games on the premises. Then play the game once and leave. Try to act disgusted."

"I won't have to *act*," Flanagan said.

"WELL?" CAPTAIN HENDLER demanded when Flanagan and White entered his office.

"My compliments to your gut," the sergeant said.

"We've got the games in several places," Flanagan added, "but not all. At least not yet. One place looks promising. It has what appears to be a two-way mirror overlooking the machines."

"So someone can observe the players?"

"I'd bet on it. We didn't play the game. We shot pool instead."

The captain nodded approval.

"He's only telling half of it," White said. "He hustled me for two bucks."

Hendler smiled, then became serious. He looked at Flanagan.

Flanagan was big, rugged — the kind of man you'd like to have on your side in a fight.

Hendler knew he was straight-laced, suspected he was a John Bircher.

"How old's your son?" the captain asked.

Flanagan was slow answering. "Nineteen. *Why?*"

"*That* old?" the captain said, ignoring Flanagan's question. I'd have sworn he was younger."

"He's almost twenty but looks sixteen. It's the bane of his existence."

"What does he do?"

"He goes to drama school, wants to be an actor. He takes after his mother."

"Where does he live?"

"In an apartment over one of the dinner theaters — with two girls and another fellow."

"Good!"

Flanagan flushed and White tried to hide a smile.

"It'll make a good cover," the captain said.

"*Why?*" Flanagan demanded.

"Because we can use him . . . and there's no direct tie-in to you. Do you think he'd like to play the game at the city's expense? I'd rather not use a regular officer."

"I don't know. You'll have to ask *him*. We don't agree on much. As I said, he takes after his mother."

Hendler remembered that Flanagan and his wife were separated.

"Why don't you ask him if

he'd like to play a real part?" the captain asked.

"Why don't *you*?" Flanagan countered, his inflection taking the curse off the words. "I'm afraid he'd reject the suggestion if it came from me. He's more apt to take to it if it comes from *you*."

The captain nodded.

A SWEET-FACED YOUTH got into the mock car and sat behind the steering wheel. Before him was a two-by-three-foot movie screen.

Inserting a quarter into a slot in the steering column, he heard the roar of an engine. The body of the car began to vibrate.

The screen came alive. A pedestrian left the sidewalk and cut diagonally across the street.

The youth braked slightly and turned the steering wheel to the right to miss him. But the pedestrian looked up, saw the approaching car and tried to turn back.

The youth cut the steering wheel to the left and hit the brake harder — but he was too late. There was a sickening thud as of a body being hit by the car and a piercing scream. The man's mangled body flashed briefly on the screen in an instant pool of blood. Then the car rushed heedlessly on, going faster and faster, fleeing the scene.

The youth's face whitened. He cringed in shock. But before he could recover, a horn honked behind him. A car passed him on

the left, then cut in on him sharply.

In sudden panic, the youth twisted the wheel to the right, hitting a car parked at the curb.

There was a blinding flash before the screen went dark. The youth received an electric shock. And the car ceased to vibrate.

For a moment the youth sat in the body of the car, shaking. He seemed on the point of getting out. But then, almost reluctantly, he took out another quarter and inserted it in the slot.

Twelve quarters later, a five-year-old girl ran into the street in pursuit of her ball and, instead of trying to avoid her, the youth ran over her deliberately. A smile curled the corners of his mouth and he licked his lips, seemingly unconsciously.

It was as if he had become another person.

Behind a two-way mirror, a middle-aged man observed the youth's reactions and ticked them off with red checkmarks in the appropriate boxes on the checklist clamped to his clipboard. The checkmarks looked like daggers dripping blood.

CAPTAIN HENDLER STUDIED the sweet-faced youth. They were seated in a dingy apartment over a dinner theater.

Marvin Flanagan looked nothing like his father. He was small and slightly built.

"How is it going?" Hendler

asked.

The youth shrugged and twisted his right hand back and forth. "I think I've made contact, but I can't be sure. Last week I went in every day during the noon hour on my lunch break. The first three days I spent around three dollars. Thursday I spent five dollars, and Friday six dollars.

"I skipped Saturday and Sunday and went back yesterday. I spent eight dollars before I quit. Then I went to the bar. Ordered a beer. A man came out of the door near the mirror window and sat down next to me. He ordered a beer, then struck up a conversation."

"What about?"

"Cars. He asked me if I owned a car and I said yes. Then he wanted to know my attitude toward it."

"What did you tell him?"

"I let him think it's a kind of sex substitute, that I get a thrill from sticking the ignition key into the lock, turning it, revving the engine."

Hendler nodded.

"Today when I finished playing, he joined me again — bought me a beer. Then he questioned me about the game, asked what kind of thrill it gave me. He couldn't have known so much about my playing if he hadn't been watching. Once he let something slip and bit his lip. I pretended not to notice and kept on talking."

"Good! What does he look like?"

"Thin, middle-aged, non-

descript — deliberately so. He lacks coloration — if you know what I mean. He could stand out if he wanted to. Today he asked about my job."

"What did you tell him?"

"That I'm working as a stock boy while trying to break into the theater. I told him I was looking for a better job when I stopped at the bar for a beer and got hooked on the game. What bugs me is that I am."

Hendler frowned. "Do you think it was wise to make up a nonexistent job?"

"But it's not. I've been working at it for a year."

"Your father doesn't know about it."

Marvin smiled. "There are a lot of things about me he doesn't know. Does he know I'm working for you?"

"Yes."

"Was it his idea?"

"No. When I suggested it, he refused to ask you. He said you'd be more apt to do it if the request came from me."

"He's smarter than I thought. Does he approve of what I'm doing?"

"I don't know."

"Does mother know?"

"I don't know. I suspect not. Do you feel threatened?"

"Yes and no," the youth said, twisting his right hand back and forth.

"Do you want out?"

"No. I have to prove some-

thing."

"To yourself or to your father?"

The youth grinned. "Both!" he said.

"I TALKED TO Marvin about playing the game," Hendler said. "He says he's working as a stock boy and has been for a year."

"I know," Flanagan said.

The captain looked puzzled. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Flanagan shrugged. "I'm not supposed to know. I check on him to make sure he's all right. I'm concerned for his well being — but he'd call it invasion of his privacy."

"I use the cool-word — check — and think I have worthwhile motives. He'd use the hot-word — spying — and give it the worst possible construction. It's like my saying he's rebelling and his saying he's doing his own thing, trying to find his identity. It's semantics that cause trouble and that I'm trying to avoid."

Hendler nodded, started to say something, then decided not to.

"What did he tell you?" Flanagan asked.

"He thinks he's made contact with the man behind the game. He's afraid he's becoming addicted to it."

"I don't like that," Flanagan said. "I don't like it a bit."

Captain Hendler received a call from Dr. Gramm, the psychologist who was interviewing the



seventeen-year-old who had driven into the crowd.

"I checked out your hunch," Dr. Gramm said. "The boy *has* played the games. But there's more."

He hesitated. Hendler waited for him to continue.

"For one thing, there's a gap in his memory. I suspect he's undergone some experience and been hypnotized so he won't *consciously* remember it. He acts as if he's been programmed — like a computer."

"Programmed?"

"Conditioned. Do you know anything about conditioned reflexes?"

"Not much," the captain confessed. "About all I know is some Russian conditioned dogs so they'd start salivating at the sound of a bell."

Dr. Gramm said, "That's about

all most people know about Pavlov's experiments. They know Pavlov rang a bell at the same time he fed his dogs, so the dogs learned to substitute the stimulus of the bell for the sight and smell of the food — which normally caused them to salivate. When they heard the bell after they'd been conditioned, they would begin to salivate — even though no food was present.

"Most people don't know that Pavlov operated on the dogs so the saliva would pour out of slits in their cheeks — enabling him to observe their reactions more readily. Nor do they know about his other experiments in conditioned reflexes. In one, he took his dogs to the top of a flight of stairs, then savagely beat them. After awhile when they were taken to the top of the stairs, they began to tremble and cry as if being beaten."

Hendler shivered. "You think the boy was conditioned to drive into the crowd?"

Dr. Gramm said, "I'd bet on it!"

CAPTAIN HENDLER HOISTED himself onto a wooden packing crate in the storeroom of the business supply house where Marvin Flanagan worked. "I got your message," he said. "It sounded urgent."

Young Flanagan appeared tense. His face was white and drawn. "Things are happening

faster than I expected," he said, taking a seat on a crate next to the captain.

"The man bought me another beer today, then introduced himself. His name's Brilliant. He asked if I'd like to play a more sophisticated version of the game — one that's being developed. He said they're in the testing stage and need players to try it out and give their reactions.

"I said I'd like to. *I would.* I want to play — to test myself with the game and whatever it is that's going down — but I'm scared. And I'm not afraid to admit it."

"I'd worry about you if you weren't, wouldn't let you continue. The question is — 'Do you *really* want to?'"

"Yes! I've still got something to prove. But it's breaking too fast. Brilliant wanted me to go with him this noon. I almost panicked. I told him I had to get back to work, that I was working on a shipment that has to go out today. He tried to persuade me to skip it.

"I told him *no* — that I couldn't risk losing my job since I'm planning to get married."

"Are you — in case he checks?"

The youth nodded. "Brilliant says he'll meet me here after work and take me to where the game is located."

"Did you agree?"

Again the youth nodded, his face troubled.

"I must warn you," the captain said. "He may try to hypnotize you."

Young Flanagan brightened.

"If you think he is, pretend to go under. Can you do it?"

The youth nodded. "I was in a play in which I was supposed to be hypnotized. The director had a hypnotist coach me." He paused, then said, "Should I carry a gun?"

"No! Brilliant may search you after you've supposedly gone under. Carry what you'd normally have in your pockets — keys, your billfold, a handkerchief — but not anything that would lead to your father. Do you want protection?"

Young Flanagan hesitated and then said, "No."

"If you change your mind," Captain Handler commanded, "call me!"

"AS OF THIS MOMENT," Handler said, you're on special assignment. Go over to where your son works. Follow him — and whoever is with him — when he leaves work. Don't let either of them catch sight of you. That goes double for Marvin.

"He says he doesn't want protection — but I wouldn't be able to look at myself in the mirror mornings if something happened and I hadn't given him every possible protection. After all, he's a volunteer. He's not in this for money or glory."

"What is he in it for?" Flan-

agan asked.

"To prove something to himself and to you. I suspect he'll prove it or die trying. You're to see that nothing happens. I know I don't have to tell you *not* to lose them."

Flanagan frowned. "What do you want me to do? Go on in if I smell something wrong?"

"Yes! But only as a last resort! He'll never forgive you if you foul this up for no reason. He'll probably not forgive you if there *is* a reason. But that's not what I'm worried about."

He studied Flanagan.

"What's bugging you?"

Flanagan asked.

"You and Marvin. Marvin and you. I'm not sure that Marvin can control the situation. He's too eager to play the game. I want you to follow him till he gets back to his apartment. If he acts like he's going to run over someone, ram him. And *that's* an order!"

The captain handed Sergeant White a slip of paper. "Flanagan's gone to this address to tail his son and another man. Tail Flanagan in case something should go wrong. But for God's sake don't let him see you."

Sergeant White frowned. "What am I supposed to do — back him up?"

"Only if he needs help. You're to insure that he follow orders."

The sergeant's frown deepened. "What orders?"

"If his kid tries to run over someone, Flanagan's supposed to

ram him. If he acts like he's not going to, *you* ram him! If Flanagan interferes, shoot him!"

MARVIN FLANAGAN stared at the sleek red body of the open sports car. With its chrome trim, it was a young man's dream.

Slipping behind the wheel, he put on the 3-dimensional glasses. Brilliant handed him, then followed instructions. He fastened the seatbelt and shoulder harness, inserted a half dollar in a slot in the steering column, and a U-shaped screen dropped down around him. At the same time, a street scene appeared on the screen.

Turning the ignition key, Marvin was rewarded with a powerful roar. There was no vibration. Just a sense of power.

He shifted the four-on-the-floor, and as he went through the sequence of gears, the convertible gained speed and the street scene flew past.

Suddenly a car pulled up on his left. The car was fancier than his own and he felt a twinge of envy.

There were two blacks drinking beer in the car. The passenger made an obscene gesture and called Marvin a dirty name.

Marvin suspected that if *he* had been black, the youths would have been white.

Then the black threw his beer can, and Marvin ducked instinctively. His car went out of control, there was a blinding flash, a sound

of tearing metal, and Marvin received an electric shock.

The screen lifted and Marvin sat shaking in the seat.

Brilliant smiled. "Not a very good show," he said. "Would you like to try again?" He offered Marvin another half dollar.

It was a moment before Marvin reached out and took it.

This time there was a different street scene.

Marvin shifted the four-on-the-floor, the convertible gained momentum and a cyclist pulled in front of him from a side street, causing him to hit the brakes and burn rubber. He could even smell it.

Marvin tried to pass the cyclist, but the black-jacketed youth drove a serpentine path in front of him, preventing his passing. The cyclist rode slower and slower, bringing Marvin's car *almost* to a stop.

Seeing his opportunity, Marvin hit the gas and started around the cyclist, but the cyclist cut in front of him. There was no way to avoid him. Marvin hit the brakes — swerved to the right.

Another blinding flash, followed by another shock, left him breathless.

This time he snatched the half dollar from Brilliant, stuck it angrily in the slot, needing several attempts to insert it.

A car with four attractive young Jewish looking girls in it pulled up on his right and drove along even with him. At first the girls

flirted with Marvin; then they began to make unflattering remarks about his appearance, to question his manhood.

A car with four nuns pulled up on his left. The nuns looked at him disdainfully, and suddenly he seemed to be hearing the unflattering remarks in stereo.

Then the two cars speeded up and began to cut in on him — one from the left, the other from the right.

He had to brake quickly to keep from hitting them, and there was a violent jerk of the sleek red car as if it had been struck from the rear by someone who'd been tailgating and unable to stop. Marvin was thrown violently forward. There was a blinding flash, another shock.

Brilliant was again smiling when the screen lifted. "Your ploy was to speed up, hit the two cars at their front wheels," he said, "to peel them away from you — send them into a spin."

He held out another half dollar. Marvin took it when he was able.

After a while Marvin lost track of time. With each insertion of a coin, he was confronted by another, more frustrating situation intended to send his blood pressure higher. Each time those who frustrated him were clearly identifiable as members of some religious, ethnic or other group. Each time he failed, he received a shock and was confronted by Brilliant's insolent smile and insulting com-

ments.

What he did not know was that Brilliant was noting his reactions to blacks, Jews, Catholics, Fascists, KKK's, union men and assessing the degree of his prejudice by checking the proper classification. *None* _____ *Mild* _____ *Average* _____ *Strong* _____ *Extreme* _____

In the end — when he was confronted by a mob of *all* those who had frustrated him, flooding across the road — Marvin speeded up and drove into their midst, sending their bodies flying. In slow motion, the mob seemed to open before him as bodies were tossed into the air — like the unfolding of a flower.

"That was better — *much* better!" Brilliant congratulated him when the car came to a stop with the final death scene imprinted on the screen. "Shall we call it a day? Try again tomorrow?"

Marvin nodded dumbly.

Brilliant snapped his fingers. The scene on the screen disappeared. Marvin came awake as from a nightmare.

CAPTAIN HENDLER RECEIVED the two phoned-in reports within minutes of one another.

"He's safely home," Flanagan said. "Though *safely* is hardly the right word. He looked as if he were in shock when he came out of the building. It was all I could do to keep from rushing over and putting my arms around him."

He paused, then added, "I'm not sure I'm the one for this job. I don't know if I could have rammed him — after I'd seen his face."

Hundler reassured him, then cut him off.

Sergeant White's call came a short time later. "They're both home," he said. "When they passed me, it was like seeing two ghosts. I'm not sure I could have shot Flanagan after that."

Again the captain uttered reassurances. The call he was waiting for was a long time coming.

"I'm supposed to go back tomorrow," Marvin said when he called at last. "But I can't take much more. To tell the truth, I'm not sure I wasn't halfway hypnotized. If something had angered me on the way home, I'm not sure what I would have done."

What if he'd seen his father "spying" on him? Hendler wondered. What would he have done then?

"Do you want out?" Hendler asked. "Or have you yet to prove what you set out to?" he added, hating himself for it.

"I don't know. I really don't," Marvin said, and the line went dead.

Captain Hendler made discreet inquiries and learned that the games were owned by the Target Import-Export Company, which also rented the warehouse. The company had a box-number address. The names of its officers

and those on the games' license were obviously false.

Hundler apprised Flanagan and White of this information, separately, and warned them to be careful.

At 5:30, Marvin called from a pay phone to say that he'd waited for Brilliant outside the supply house but that Brilliant had not appeared.

Hundler told him to go home.

Flanagan called in to say that Marvin had failed to meet Brilliant and had gone to his apartment.

"What do you want me to do now?" he asked.

"Check the bar where the game is located. See what you can learn. Keep a low profile."

Fifteen minutes later, White called to report that Marvin had gone home and that Flanagan had gone to the Silver Fox Bar after making a phone call.

"What do I do now?" he asked.

"Go back to the boy's apartment. Keep an eye on him. I'll have someone relieve you."

A short time later, Flanagan walked into Hendler's office. "The game's been pulled," he said. "A truck came this afternoon and picked it up. The drive gave the manager five hundred dollars, as per his contract with the company, for removing it, then picked up his copy of the contract."

"The truck had no name on it, and the signature on the receipt is illegible. What do we do now?"

Hundler hesitated. "Nothing,"

he said at last. "Go on home."

"I GOOFED!" Hendler said, addressing Marvin, who was seated between his father and Sergeant White in the captain's office. "I should have hunted up a judge last night, gotten a search warrant — but I thought it could wait till today."

"What happened?"

"The judge held up issuing the warrant. By the time he did, it was too late. The warehouse had been cleaned out."

"What now?"

"I thought maybe the three of us could pick your brain — see if there's anything you forgot to tell me, anything you observed that didn't seem significant at the time but does now."

"Okay. Fire away!"

The session proved to be a bust. Marvin was unable to dredge up anything he hadn't already told the captain.

He and his father spoke politely to one another — almost too politely. It was as if there were an armed truce between them.

In the end, the captain shrugged to admit that they'd come to a dead end, then said, "I've a confession."

He confessed his instructions to Flanagan and White and repeated their confessions to him.

Marvin and his father exchanged glances. It was the first time they had really looked at one another. Marvin smiled shyly.

His father looked away in embarrassment.

"What I can't figure out," Marvin said, "is who's behind these games — what they hope to gain from them?"

"The Mafia controls vending machines and pinball games in many cities," his father said.

"But how could they benefit from having people run over?"

"Maybe they're trying to take over the union at the plant," White suggested.

"They already control the union," Hendler said.

"Maybe they're trying to break up the strike, eliminate its leaders."

"Maybe it's the FBI trying to infiltrate the Mafia by setting up an operation they think the Mafia would try to take over."

"Perhaps it's the CIA," Hendler said. "Another of their operations — on mind control."

"Or an experiment by some psychologist for a university or multi-national corporation."

"What about the army? Could they be trying out some new brain-washing technique to test the limits of stress?"

By the time they exhausted all the possibilities they could think of, they were more confused than when they'd started.

"Why don't we go home and see your mother," Flanagan said when the meeting broke up.

Marvin hesitated. "I've a better suggestion," he said. "Why don't

you and Mom have dinner with Helen and me tomorrow? We've something to tell you."

His father nodded. "Are you all right?" he asked.

Marvin nodded, wanting to shrug.

"SABAN HERE!"

"I've had to scrub 'Operation Death Ride,'" Brilliant said.

"What happened?"

"A police captain got curious. Luckily I was alerted by my informant. I pulled 'Death Ride,' and was able to dismantle everything and give the warehouse a thorough cleaning before he could get a search warrant."

"How?"

"I got to the judge first, identified myself as being with the CIA, and told him we were doing research in altering human behavior. He bought it hook, line and sinker — held up the warrant."

"Wouldn't it have been better to buy off the captain?"

"No. He wears a white hat — sees everything in black and white."

"In that case, you did right."

"Where do you want me to go now?"

There was a momentary hesitation. "Dallas," Saban said. "Set up there. But wait till Hargate reports to you. Fill him in on the territory — the problems he

faces."

"What's he bringing with him?"

"Two new games — *Revenge* and *Assassination*. They're sophisticated versions of the game in which you shoot a light beam at an automaton with light-sensitive spots in its shoulders. It turns each time you hit it. You can keep turning it back and forth in the same spot if you're a good enough shot."

"What's the gimmick?"

"In *Revenge* the automaton can be given any face you want — that of the boss who fired you, the girl who jilted you, the salesman who ripped you off. You can shoot off its arms and legs — blow off its head. But if you miss, you receive a shock."

"And in *Assassination* I assume we give the automaton the face of the politician, businessman or labor leader we want eliminated."

"No. It's more sophisticated. Behind the automaton is a screen with the picture of someone being fired, jilted or ripped off. Our victim's picture is flashed on the screen subliminally."

"The way popcorn and coke were flashed on movie screens to get people to buy them — till the government put a stop to it?"

"Right! Give Hargate a picture of our curious police captain. He'll be our *first* target."



Little Girl Lost

Samantha loved Rudi too deeply to let him go. So when she learned she had lost him she took steps.

by

CARA SELL

"IT'S JUST LIKE BEING IN THE COUNTRY," SHE SAID TO the man sitting before the fire, "snowbound on top of a mountain."

Samantha leaned her forehead against the frost-rimmed window. Tears misted her eyes as she gazed into the cotton candy swirls which cloaked the glitter of the New York night. For a year they had lived together in a fairy tale of their own making, as fragile and precious as crystal, now it was

broken. Strange, it should be snowing just as it had the night their lives had first entwined.

"Do you ever think of how we met? How fast it all happened?" she glanced toward the man. He was sitting in the wing chair before the flickering fire. *How fair his hair is!* she thought. Probably it had been that fairness which first attracted her. Italians were dark, at least the ones she had met — until she met Rudi.

They had come together at the

Graysons', a dull couple who invariably invited the great incompatible to gather at their apartment. Liquor flowed, canapes languished as controversy flared. Inevitably the parties broke up early, with everyone going away mad.

This particular evening Samantha had found herself, bare-backed to the waist in floor-length black velvet, standing alone in the middle of an angry, surging sea of gesticulating people. Cool, unruffled, she stood, a small oasis of calm dark beauty, looking for the young man who had brought her to this ugly place. At last she saw him in a corner, red faced, dangling a scruffy little man with one hand, the other pulled back in a fist ready to strike.

"Would you like to go?" a softly accented voice murmured next to her ear. Startled, she swung around to face the smiling blond giant who leaned so close.

"I can't," Samantha said. "My guy's having a — a — discussion." The blond man's eyes looked in the direction she indicated.

"You are too delicate to be damaged by these wild bulls. Come, I'll get your wrap." And she had gone with him out into the snow.

Hand in hand they wandered along Park Avenue to pause momentarily beneath a snow laden canopy. His eyes questioned. Her eyes assented. The elevator had

taken them up to his penthouse on the twenty-first floor.

Oh yes, it had been a fairy tale — a fairy tale complete with evil witch, in this case Rudi's wife. Separated for years, he had told her — wouldn't give him a divorce, he said. Samantha had stayed. Somehow she couldn't imagine life without the touch of his hand, the soft caress of his voice. Lots of Northern Italians were blond, he told her and she had stayed.

"Io t'amo, Carina," he whispered and the girl forgot everything and everyone she had ever known. Rudi became her life and she stayed.

Long winter evenings spent themselves before the fire, wound in love. Sometimes the lovers dreamed into the dancing flames, her cheek against his knee, his hand stroking the silk of her hair. The long sun-drenched summer had been lounged away on the terrace.

"Io t'amo, Carina," he said. "You are so unlike Natalie," he told her. Samantha set herself to be all the things the witch had not been. Natalie wasn't cut out to be a homemaker, Rudi had said, so Samantha had learned to cook. She even learned to bake bread and make pasta. She knitted for him and sewed her own clothes. She became the total woman enslaved, a chattel. She reveled in complete surrender to her man. Rudi wax fat and sleek with

contentment.

Samantha did not care that Rudi was the American representative of some unmentionable European "consortium" any more than she had cared about walking out on her job without giving notice or leaving her flatmate high and dry. It had been as though an enchantment had befallen her the night of the Graysons' party.

Now the spell was broken.

"*You broke the spell, darling. You know you broke the spell,*" she accused, moving over to the fire. "Didn't I love you enough?"

She wanted to stroke his hair where the firelight flamed it into gold, but she knew, if she did, the tears would come. It wouldn't do to cry. She contented herself with gazing at the strong line of his jaw, the straight nose, the full passionate lips as he sat so aloof, so detached, silhouetted against the soft blue wing of the chair.

"You knew everything was finished — why did you let me keep playing the fool?" Samantha asked.

If only she hadn't come down from their aerie at that exact moment. But she had. It was the first anniversary of their love and she wanted to get something wonderful to show him how much she adored him.

Her heart singing, Samantha descended into the world to be disenchanted. It was while crossing Fifth Avenue at Fifty-seventh Street that she had seen him. Rudi

was leaning down, talking to Natalie, his wife. He was laughing and seemed more carefree than Samantha had ever seen him. He was so beautiful her heart caught, no one would have dreamed he had lived over forty years.

Samantha moved as close as she dared and heard him say, just before being swept away by the lunch-time crowd, "Thank God, it's over!" At the corner, Samantha turned back to see Rudi cover the woman's mouth with a loving caress.

Numb with shock, Samantha fled uptown, stumbling along the familiar street, ducking into the chrystaline forest of Central Park. Snow-patched and dazzling in the sun, it would cloak her from prying eyes should her grief cause tears to fall.

"It's the sun that makes my eyes water," she could say, smiling brightly, her face stretched into a toothy grimace. She dropped down on a bench by the boat lake. Children, bundled into small colorful sausages, raced back and forth, pulling boats through the thinly iced water.

"Help me, Miss. It's floating away, my string broke," the earnest-faced Eskimo trembled, tears of loss glistening on frost-nipped cheeks. He held a piece of frayed string towards Samantha as a pledge of good faith. The child looked poor and dirty.

Samantha held his eyes for a moment, "I can't," she said.

"I can't even help myself." She rushed away hoping to reach home before the dam burst.

Two hours before Rudi was due, Samantha splashed cold water on her face. She was calm, the storm had passed. A situation had arisen that must be faced, and she was no longer a child lost within the pages of the Red Fairy Book. She was a woman.

Automatically, Samantha prepared dinner. She bathed and put on his favorite negligee. She fixed her hair in the style he liked best, she made up her face to perfection. She wasn't going to make it easy for him to discard her.

Samantha touched perfume to her wrists, behind her ears. Rudi had found her so easily, so easily she had become his. Because of her hungry heart, she supposed, an orphan, almost twenty-five, lost — so lost. Of course she had been easy to find.

When at last Rudi came in the door, he began to speak but Samantha silenced him with a kiss.

"You look like a snowman!" She laughed, taking away his coat. She was surprised at how normally she was behaving, as though nothing had happened.

"And you look an enchantress, *carina!* I have something to —" once more she silenced him with a kiss.

"Later," she said. "You must be cold." She led him to the

fire. He folded into his chair with a contented sigh. Lovingly, Samantha took off his shoes and replaced them with slippers. She took a cocktail from the mantel.

"There, darling, you drink this — it will take away the chill." She kissed the top of his head. "I'll get dinner."

Samantha carried the artistically arranged plates into the dining room. She had prepared his favorite meal, veal with black olives and tiny mushrooms, homemade pasta and a large green salad. She lit the candles and poured the wine. Everything was as it should be — flowers, crisp linen, old silver and cut glass. The world she had built out of love. She paused for a moment in the doorway watching the fair haired man.

Suddenly, the telephone shattered the silence. Samantha started as though struck. She picked it up on the fourth ring, "Hello?" she said in a small careful voice.

"Oh hi, Sam — Natalie here." She was always so phony, Alabama phony. "Can I speak to Rudi?"

"He's busy." Samantha's voice was diamond hard and cold.

"Too bad, not to worry. S'pose you know by now, anyway. Just wanted to tell him you two can get married anytime after next week. Seeing I'm getting a divorce, it seems kinda silly to wait on the Reno lark, so I'm flying out first thing tomorrow morning to get a quicky one in Mexico!"

Well, have a lovely life, you two!
By-eeee!"

Samantha replaced the telephone gently, her face stricken, drained of all color. She leaned her forehead against the frost-trimmed window, tears misting her eyes.

"Oh Rudi, why didn't you *tell* me?" She gazed into the cotton candy whirls that cloaked the glitter of the New York night. Her face. Reflected in the glass, was pale, ephemeral, the ghost of the Snow Queen.

She moved quickly now. Taking Rudi's glass to the kitchen, she mixed a cocktail exactly the same as the one she had mixed for him, only this time she didn't bother with ice. She carried it back to the fire, careful not to spill.

"To us, my love," she said, draining the glass.

"I love you," she said, kneeling at his feet. *Io t'amo*," she whispered, resting her cheek against his knee. The movement caused Rudi's head to fall heavily forward onto his chest.



The Hunch Player

by R.G. HALLAWELL

Even with a name like Arnold Palmer, the client sounded on the level to private eye Jack Wells. But then Wells found that he had been set up as the all-time Patsy in what quickly turned into a double murder.

I WAS HAVING my usual Tuesday morning breakfast at Al McCoy's Bar and Grill on Chestnut. Two eggs over light, toast, one strip of bacon and a Bloody Mary. McCoy is the original economist. No napkin for hand-to-mouth mistakes and no swizzle stick for the drink.

I absentmindedly stirred the drink with my bacon strip and it crumbled into the glass' red contents. Now I've got a Bloody Mary Bacon, I thought. And that's when I got the hunch.

I leaned over the bar and

reached for McCoy's *Racing Form*, taking care to avoid the loaded shotgun he kept as hold-up protection. Al needed the gun like I could use an extra billfold. Robbers seldom frequent bars that have no customers.

Also, McCoy is six-five and weighs about as much as Yellowstone's average bear. In addition, he has the good humor or a guy who's just been told he is to have hemorrhoid surgery — without anesthesia. McCoy's place was probably safer than the First National Bank.



There it was in the third at Aqueduct. Mary Bacon — all girl jockey was riding Cozy Ridge in an eight-thousand-dollar claiming race for three-year-olds. Distance, seven furlongs. It was a hunch-bet if I ever saw one.

I'm a great believer in hunches. So was my ex-wife, whose father was an oil-well wildcatter. When she found out my name was Jack Wells, she proposed and I accepted — not being terribly discreet while we were in bed at three a.m.

Two years and seventeen successive dry-holes later, her father threw me out of Oklahoma. That also included New Mexico and Arizona. Thank God, he hadn't drilled in every state, but I found that well-drillers are terribly superstitious. All I had to do was walk around him and six rigs would quit pumping.

So I took the hint — had my fractured nose set across the state-line and eventually signed the divorce papers.

I was about to ask McCoy to lend me twenty and add it to the \$79.95 tab I owed him when somebody's forefinger poked my arm. The finger was attached to a tanned specimen wearing a Brooks Brothers suit, light-blue shirt with tie not too wide — not too narrow. I looked down at his alligator loafers and read dollar signs. He looked a worried forty, hair-line slipping a bit, and blue eyes that looked irritated and watery.

McCoy stared from behind the bar like he was seeing the first Abominable Snowman in captivity. Normally, just us bums came in here, so Al wasn't prepared for the executive trade.

"Sorry if I startled you. I'm looking for Jack Wells who does private investigations. The man at the barber shop said I could find him here."

The man at the barber shop was a bookie to whom I owed eighty dollars. He may have bugged my drinking arm to make sure I wasn't leaving town.

"Oh yeah, the guy at the barber shop. Great friend of mine ever since I rescued his daughter from the kidnappers two years ago," I lied. "I'm Jack Wells, so grab a booth over there and we can talk privately."

Leering at McCoy's disappointment, I led him thirty feet away into a booth that didn't have patches on the red-leather seats.

Once we were seated, he stuck out a fing-fingered hand. "My name is Palmer — Arnold Palmer," he said.

"Yeah, and I'm Henry Fonda."

"No, no! Not *that* Arnold Palmer. I'm a registered representative with Fogle, Hayes and Davenport. Stocks, bonds, mutual funds — that sort of thing."

A guy using a name like that couldn't possibly be lying, I told myself. "Okay, Palmer — so what do you want?" I asked him and signaled McCoy for another

Bloody Mary.

"It's my wife. She's left me and is living with another man. I want him roughed up and my wife brought back home."

I sighed, sipped my drink and looked at this typical jerk who thought private detectives were miracle workers. Palmer was rubbing an eyelid. I didn't know whether he was about to cry or the cigaret smoke was getting to him.

"Look, Palmer, I'm not a goon squad and I don't normally beat up on people. I'm so peaceful that Disney once made a movie of my life. It was called *Ole Yeller*. Maybe you saw it?"

It was Palmer's turn to sigh. "Okay, so I made a mistake. But talk to my wife. Convince her to come back to me. Look, it's worth four hundred dollars to me for somebody to at least try."

I get greedy when I owe Yellowstone bears, bookies, landlords and telephone companies. I held out my hand and Palmer caressed it with four lovely C-notes.

My new client handed me the photo. "This is my wife. She wrestles under the name 'Ramona Sanchez'. She's really very good," he added proudly. It was a ring photo obviously posed, but 'Sanchez' had everything and a lot of it showed. Her D-cups ranneth over, her tights were tight and I wondered if her morals were loose. She was a dark, well-built beaut.

"Your wife's a wrestler?" I

asked. It was incredible. The two of them went together like Israel and Palestine. A stock-broker with a pro-wrestler wife — that could close-up Wall Street!

"She makes more money than I do, but as a registered rep with Fogle, Hayes and Davenport, I can't publicize her profession. They wouldn't hold still for it and I could lose my job. That's why this has to be done quietly. I need someone I can trust to just bring her home and forget it."

I thought of another profession she might be good at, but managed to lift my decayed mind out of the gutter and away from the photo. Palmer gave me the address of the guy she was living with, plus his own home address. We shook hands as he left the booth.

"Hey, I almost forgot. What does this guy look like?" I asked.

"Dark complexion. Maybe six-two and one-ninety. He could be part Indian. His name is Jake Tall. That's about all I know about him." Palmer gave a half-hearted wave and left me standing there. Now all I had to do was punch out a muscular scalp-hunter and drag home a gal who might break my leg with a step-over toehold. Why couldn't I have been a panty-hose salesman?

Fenwick subdivision in the southwestern part of the city is where the 'new rich' live — the people who build shopping centers, franchise muffler shops and

inherit money. For fifty thousand, you could buy a five-acre tract and build a "restricted" house. It only had to cost a quarter-million to pass the test. Jake Tall must have some kind of wampum, I figured.

Two sixty-four Delano Drive was a spread-out, spread-up English Tudor home with a four-car garage and a concrete driveway. I could see a tennis court and pool from where I parked my Mustang midway up the drive. A black Lamborghini 350 GT was garage parked, but the other three stalls were empty. The car was a V-12 Superleggera with Borrani wheels. I tried not to drool on my lapel when I compared it to my rusting Mustang.

Nobody in the pool or on the court. I knocked at one of the rear doors and found it open. It led me into a den that looked like a city block. A grand piano and three gigantic blank TV's stared at me. A fireplace that looked like the opening to Carlsbad Caverns yawned from the other side of the room.

I took three or four steps across the tiled floor and stumbled over two legs. Jake Tall lay on the floor behind the piano.

He wore a tweed jacket and slacks. Like Palmer said, he was a big man and dark. Once he had had a moustache, but one side was missing. A Magnum slug had taken part of the moustache, lip, some bicuspid teeth and a few

other odds and ends before it exited behind his skull. I felt my breakfast light up *tilt*.

The girl lay face-down and rump-up in a red bathtub. It had once been white marble, but pints of blood from her ear-to-ear throat slash had dyed it crimson. Her brown muscular legs protruded from the tub's sides — toes pointing accusingly in my direction. I lost my Bloody Mary drinks and the rest of the McCoy breakfast in the john. By the time I had finished, my ears picked up the siren sounds coming toward Delano Drive.

I had been nicely set up by "Palmer" or whoever the hell he was. I groaned inwardly thinking about the coming confrontation with Police Captain Ellis Higgs, a five-four bald-headed gnome better known at headquarters for his fanatical temper-tantrums and Keystone-cop antics. Higgs hated private-eyes in general and me in particular.

I sat on the Mustang's bumper, still admiring the Lamborghini and trying to settle my stomach with Tums and a cigaret. A minute later, two ambulances, a patrol car, the county coroner and Ellis Higgs arrived in funeral-procession order.

I recited the gory details about the bodies and gave the approximate time of my arrival. Higgs, the coroner and the ambulance crew went inside while a patrolman made certain I wasn't going

anywhere. A half hour later the bodies, fingerprinted and sheet-wrapped, were hauled away. Finally Higgs and the gangling physician-coroner, who was now wearing a white gown over his pinstriped suit, emerged.

"From observing the rigor mortis I'd say both individuals have been dead for at least three-four hours — maybe longer. The woman's throat was slit with an extremely sharp blade and the man was shot with a large-calibre gun — probably a Magnum," the doc told Higgs.

"Terrific. You guys go to school for eight years to be able to tell me something a Boy Scout would know! No wonder there's no cure for the common cold — you guys wouldn't know a germ if you saw one!" Higgs ranted. "Okay, Mr. Hot Shot detective, let's hear how you got in on this one. And it better be good!" The little squirt was working himself up to the mouth-foaming stage.

"I was hired by a guy named Palmer — Arnold Palmer — who said he worked for —" I tried to tell Higgs.

"Oh my God, what a story! A dimwit like you is hired by Arnold Palmer. You expect me to buy that?"

"Not *that* Arnold Palmer. This guy works for Fogle, Hayes and Davenport. It's an investment firm. He said his wife was living with this guy Jake Tall and I was supposed to bring her back

home." I gave Higgs Palmer's home address. He called Fogle, Hayes and Davenport on his car phone.

Higgs gave me the bad news. "They don't have an Arnold Palmer working for them. They also don't have Jack Nicklaus or Tommy Bolt. That's the dumbest story I've heard in thirty years!"

"Yeah, it does sound fantastic," I told him.

"Here's another funny one, smart-ass. Palmer's address is a vacant lot. I just had one of my men check it out. What do you have to say about that?"

"Maybe he likes to sleep out," I offered.

"Book this dumb-ass for murder!" Higgs yelled to the cop who was supposed to be watching me. I got a free ride downtown.

I was allowed one call, so I phoned the barber-shop bookie and put twenty dollars on Cozy Ridge to win — which proves that horseplayers can function under the worst of circumstances. For the next twenty-four hours, while I smoked, napped and played solitaire with a used deck of cards that cost me five dollars, courtesy of the turn-key jail guard — a whole series of events took place with the rapidity of an unstopped clogged drain dumping its swollen contents into the sewer.

Police captain Higgs discovered he had no murder weapon. I didn't own a Magnum, so he ordered the swimming pool at two sixty-four

Delano searched. No luck.

Then the Jake Tall-Ramona Sanchez fingerprints matched the FBI's file as belonging to two individuals in a trio of bank thieves who had recently knocked off an Idaho branch-bank to the tune of ninety thousand bucks. It also came out that Tall-Sanchez were renting the English-Tudor for three G's a month.

Then Al McCoy came to the police station and backed up my story about Palmer. McCoy, with the ears of a rabbit, practically recited the word-for-word conversation for Higgs' benefit.

I was released on the understanding that I wouldn't get a sudden yen to leave town. I collected my gear and managed not to thumb my nose at Higgs on the way out.

I thanked McCoy, who grumbled something unintelligible in bear-talk, paid my bar tab from the four hundred dollars and ordered a double J&B — buying one for the bartender in the process. McCoy's opened, the scotch liquid fell in and he swallowed — all in five seconds. It was the swiftest two dollars I'd ever spent.

I ordered another drink and thought about 'Palmer'. No doubt he was the third member of the hold-up trio, had murdered Tall and Sanchez and hoped I'd be the prime suspect. But did he have all of the money? I silently voted a yes answer. Would he hole up in the city now or scram to other

territory? No answer to that one.

McCoy turned on his radio so I could hear the race results. Cozy Ridge won with Mary Bacon aboard and paid \$24.40 — I wondered what would have happened had I stirred the Bloody Mary with a legitimate swizzle-stick. Maybe there was a jock somewhere named Swizzle — who knows?

The J&B was taking hold, but it also was heating up my brain cells. What did I know about Palmer? Had he given anything away during our brief conversation? I did an instant-replay of his looks, mannerisms, choice of words.

Well-dressed because he had played the part of an investment-firm employee. The rings had been impressive and so had the damn four C-notes. A little bell tinkled somewhere under my scalp and the mental replay-picture went into color.

His eyes! He kept rubbing one of his eyelids. His eyes were irritated. I had another hunch. New contact lens, maybe? It was worth a shot in the dark.

I checked the *Yellow Pages* but my legs — not my fingers — would have to do the walking. I checked out seven optometrists before noon, had a Big Mac and coke and walked some more. I scored on the tenth try — an optical company on Wilshire. The lady was cooperative. My Mickey Mouse badge fooled her com-

pletely.

Yes — a man wearing a dark suit, light blue shirt, two rings on each hand was fitted with a pair of lenses two days ago. She looked it up — his name was Steven Ellison — no address but a phone number where they had contacted him when the lenses were ready — and yes, he had returned for an adjustment yesterday.

Some people adapted quickly to the little floating eye-devils but Ellison was having trouble. I scribbled the phone number on a matchbook and resisted an impulse to kiss the nice lady.

Phone numbers will not get you corresponding addresses. Unless you happen to know Yvonne Menninger, an AT&T employee. We were old affair-friends from way back. Ellison's name not being listed in the book dictated a call to Yvonne. I was sweet, loving, let's-go-out-to-dinner-soon and all that crap. It worked. Ellison's phone number matched the address of apartment C, 108 Philips Avenue.

I thanked Yvonne, hung up the receiver and ran for my Mustang. The .38 was still in the glove compartment. I removed it and stuck it in my shoulder-harness.

I spotted a phone booth two blocks from Palmer-Ellison's apartment and called Higgs at headquarters. I gave him the address and told him I would appreciate some back-up help.

"Are you nuts? You're a

suspect yourself!" Higgs yelped in my ear.

"Look, Captain, I found where the guy lives and I owe him one. Sit on your butt or get on out here — whichever you want. I'm doing you a favor!" His fuse was still sputtering when I hung up on him.

The green stucco was a fourplex with the C-D apartments upstairs. I loosened the .38 in its harness and tiptoed up the wooden stairway. The hall was musty with the smell of beer and grease-food. I walked quietly to the C door and listened; someone was moving around, making kitchen sounds. I turned the knob slowly. No soap. The door was bolted.

I retraced my steps and came up the stairs like a bull elk, yelling "*Fire! Fire!*" at the top of my lungs. I hammered on both apartment doors. "Get outa here — the damn place is burning up downstairs!" I yelled.

Four couples including two sailors came out of apartment D like bees from a hive. Palmer-Ellison stuck his head out of his door and looked — the wrong way. It was Palmer, all right. I put the .38 between his shoulder blades.

"Back in the room Arnie, old chum."

He walked slowly with his arms up. I closed the door. It was a crappy little apartment. One bed, two chairs and a table — one kitchen sink, one kitchen cabinet and a hotplate. I leaned him against a wall and carefully

removed the **Magnum** he had tucked under his belt in front. I tossed it on the bed and sat down.

"Doesn't look like ninety thousand buys you much these days, Arnie," I told him. "Ain't inflation terrible?"

He turned slowly and stared at me. No **Brooks Brothers** class today. Just checked slacks and a sports shirt.

"How in the hell did you find me?"

"Why, I'm a detective. Didn't I find your sweet wife and that bad old Indian?" I chided. "You set me up real good, but I have to admit your pay scale isn't too bad. The four hundred came in handy."

"How about forty thousand, Wells? That's half of what I got left. We split it and call it a day," he smiled. "Can I sit down?" he asked me.

"Try a kitchen chair and I'll just make myself comfy here on the edge of the bed," I told him and didn't move the .38 one iota while I took the four steps to the bed. "We've got company coming any minute now, so just relax."

He was a real pro — I'll give him that. The two-shot derringer must have been loosely taped underneath the kitchen chair. He just pointed it at me and fired the two shots. The first one buzzed past my ear like an angry little hornet. I never heard the second one because it wasn't head-aimed. It caught me about two inches below my left collar-bone.

I got off a shot and missed; splintering the other chair. He never made a run at me, but instead dived for a closet door rolling like a ball. I was on my knees beside the bed, my left side numb and feeling a dizziness that surpassed anything **J&B** ever produced. I splintered the closet door with two more slugs. The cordite smell in the stuffy room was making my eyes smart.

"Come on out or I *blow* you out!" I shouted at him. He came out all right — with a rush and a double-barreled shotgun. I rolled under the bed and the first barrel blew a hole in the floor. I came out from the other side and pulled the .38 trigger three times. I scored twice, but it wasn't enough. The shotgun swung back in my direction just as **Higgs and Co.** came busting in. The shotgun kept on swinging until it was even with **Higgs'** bald pate.

I threw the empty .38 with my good arm and it hit the shotgun man in the temple. He dropped and **Higgs** still had his mouth open when I passed out.

I woke up in a mechanical bed in a pale green room. The bed had white sheets and I found that I was wearing a matching shortie-nightgown that tied in the back. It registered. I was in a hospital. There was a screen separating my bed from the other two.

Who knew? **Raquel Welch** could be in the other bed, I told myself. Pushing the screen ever-so-slight-

ly with my good arm, I looked at my roommate. There sat an eighty-five-year-old man using the bed-pan. Terrific! Then the door opened and McCoy and Higgs came in together. They reminded me of the Goodyear Blimp and a passenger.

"Uh, look, we found the money. He had about eighty thousand under the mattress," Higgs said. "The guy will pull plenty of time. It turns out he's killed at least four people according to the FBI."

"You mean he's still alive?" I asked.

"All he had was two holes through his shirtsleeve. Have you ever considered target practice, Wells?" Higgs asked.

"Why shoot when you can throw an empty gun like I can?" I told him. "Hell, he would have missed you anyhow, Higgs. How many people shoot at five-four elves?"

Higgs turned purple. "You're not out of this yet Wells! We all could have been killed by that shotgun moron because you disobeyed an order. I can have your license for that!"

"Take him away, McCoy. I have to get some sleep."

McCoy, the obedient bear, picked up Higgs under one arm and went through the door. I turned over on my good side and closed my eyes. Then the door opened again. Hell, they might as well have installed a revolving escalator I thought. I risked one



eye-peep. It was Miss AT&T. Yvonne Menninger.

"I just checked at the desk, honey, and you can get out of here later today. I'm taking you home with me and I'll take good care of you," she cooed.

I laughed in spite of the pain. The Menninger Clinic would have its benefits.

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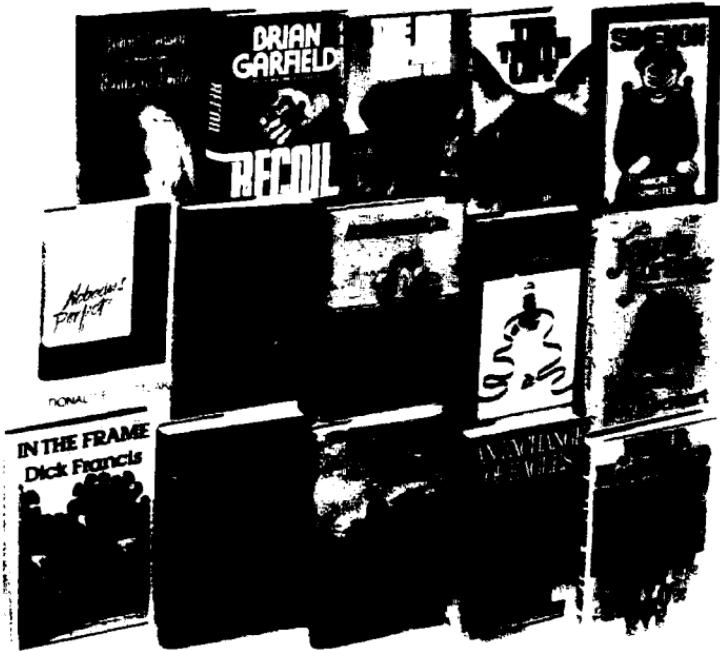
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